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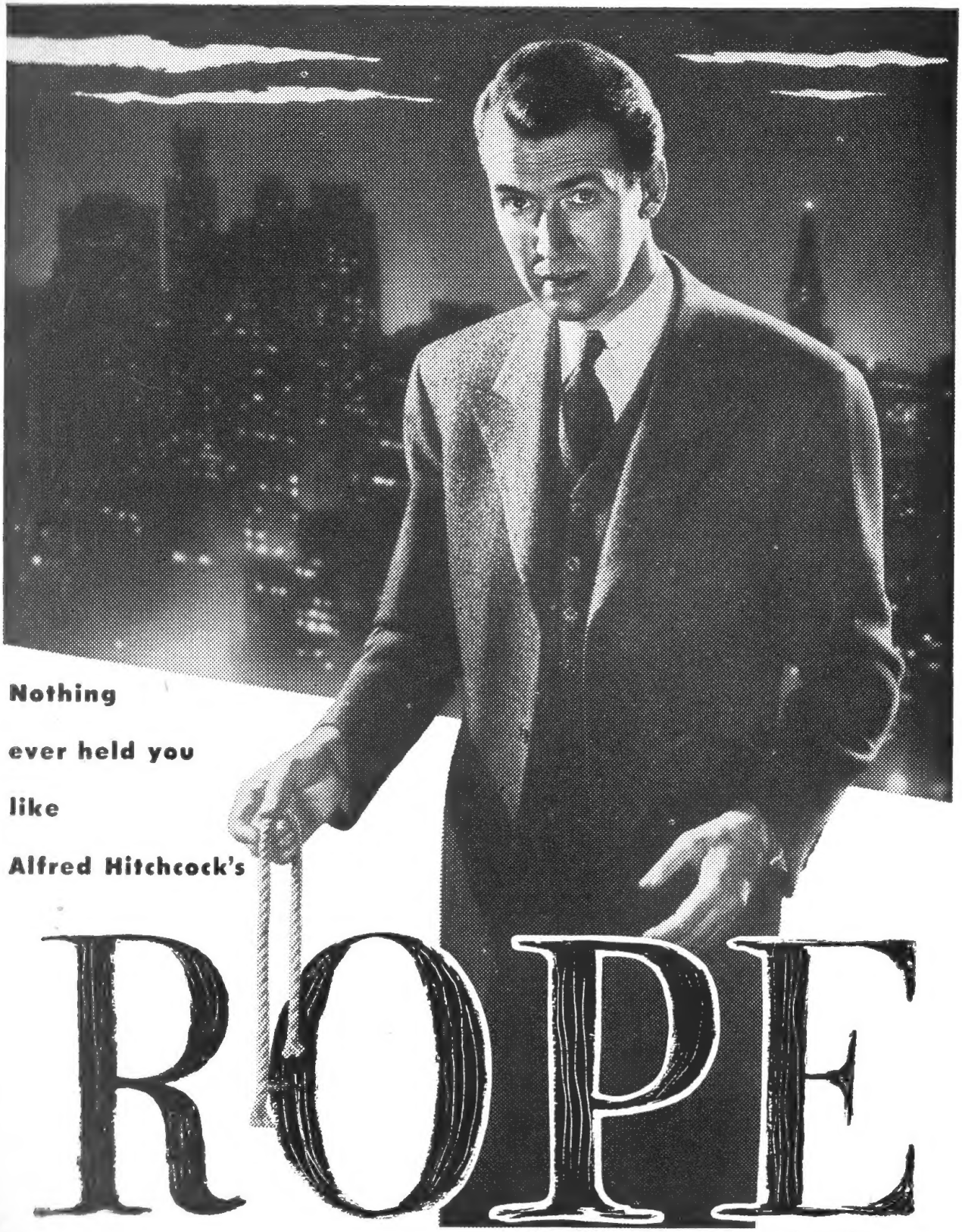

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 33, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JANUARY, 1949

COMPLETE NOVEL

Raiders of the Forest

By Jackson Cole

When marauders menace the Deep River Country, Jim Hatfield joins embattled ranchers in their fight for survival—bringing his six-guns into action to protect Texas land and timber from despoilers! 13

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The true story of Ranger Reynolds and the tough, lawless Harrell brothers

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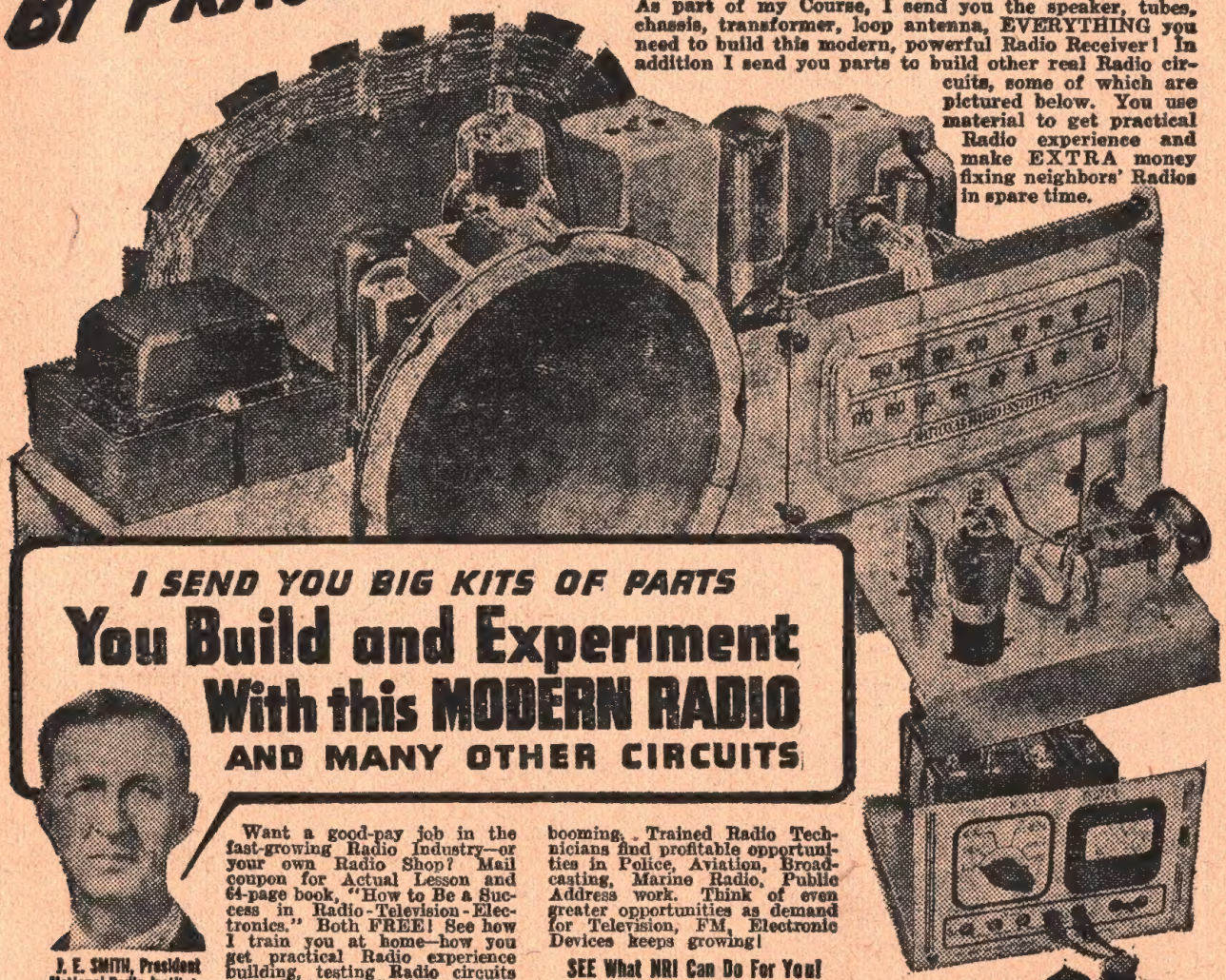

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HIYA, gals and galluses! I'm just back from a long pasear through "America's last great frontier." So I've got a heap of fresh experiences to tell you about.

About a year back, I had a quick looksee at that great wilderness in the upper left-hand corner of the map of U.S.A. I returned, camp-style this time, and really

The Olympic Peninsula

explored it. I'm mighty glad I did, because every outland, from Texas west, is settling up fast. Before many years, the spread of population will be complete, and the western wilderness will be only a memory.

But right now, the far parts of Olympic Peninsula are about as primitive as when the first white man came. If rugged adventure attracts you, a prowl of the peninsula is a rich rejuvenation of body and soul.

The Great Rain Forest

This hunk of country, sometimes called the Great Rain Forest, covers an area about the size of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Delaware. In the heart of it lies Olympic National Park, two-thirds of one million acres, almost untouched and undeveloped, and only partly explored.

The towering Olympic range, with its glittering glaciers, crowns this immense park, next to Yellowstone in size. Those glacial peaks are the source of a score or more of rivers, filled with salmon and other sea-run fish, in season.

The only road is U.S. Highway 101, that makes a grand loop around the park area for 300 miles—that and a few gravelled roads that stem from it into the dense green forest.

Unknown Land

It's surprising, in this day and age, that there isn't any complete travel guide about Olympic Peninsula. Even the natives can't tell you much about it, beyond their own doorsteps. It's the hardest country in all the West to know. Even the National Park Service hasn't made a geological survey of Olympic Range. Back in that tall, virgin timber are great reaches that civilized man has never seen, except from the air.

The first thing I did, when I got to the busy logging town of Aberdeen, gateway to the peninsula, was to spend a dollar for a regional map. Laid off in sections and townships, it showed every mountain, creek and trail, also all established campspots. It was the best investment I made, along with the $1.65 angling permit that the State of Washington issues to visitors, allowing them 10 days of priceless sport on lake and stream.

Without a regional map, a tourist can't tell where he's been, doesn't know where he's at, and has no idea of where he's going.

The skimpy facts I gave about the peninsula in a Frontier Post get-together last year produced a flock of letters from you folks,

(Continued on page 8)

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I've had my lessons just a week. I think your course is super. I was more thrilled than words can express when I found I could actually play America, The Merry Widow Waltz and the others.
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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.

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I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.
*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

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I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.
*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

asking for more. That's why I went back for a good, long prowl.

My New Tin Mule

I reckon that you want to know, first of all, how I was equipped when I reached the jumping-off place, there at Aberdeen. The main item was my new tin mule, Jenny. I've told you right recent about Jenny. She's a half-ton pickup truck with a canvas canopy—a modern covered wagon. The 6½-foot bed makes a snug, dry bunkhouse. A double-sized sleeping bag fits in it perfectly.

So I was loaded with the ol' snooze sack, with its blow-up air mattress, a 10 x 10 umbrella tent, grub box, guns and tackle. The tent, a cinch to put up and take down, was needed to store gear when Jenny was in use. Also, it made a cookshack in rainy weather. Cooking was an easy chore on a small, light gasoline stove. The tent had a waterproof sewed-in floor and mosquito netting on door and window openings.

Rain and Skeeters

That was sometimes important for comfort, because you can depend on two things up yonder—rain and skeeters. When the skeeters and no-see-um flies got hungry, a squirt from a bug bomb stampeded 'em completely. Another squirt in the pickup, just before bedtime, kept 'em out of there all night.

In some parts of the peninsula it rains practically all the time, winter or summer. That's a fact—up to 200 inches a year and more. Yet, oddly enough, there are valley pockets east of Olympic Range, on the Hood Canal side, where they get less rainfall than Mojave Desert! Yessir, down to a measly four inches a year.

I was glad to put Aberdeen behind me, with its perpetual pall of smoke from the many lumber mills. I'd been warned about bad roads. The going was plenty rough and dusty, all right. That was because Washington State is rebuilding the loop highway.

It wasn't long before I hit the first of the many Injun named rivers—the Humptulips. After that, the Quinalt, Queets, Hoh, Bogachiel, Sol Duc, Calawah, Elwah. And later, the Quilcene, Docewallips, Duckabush and

(Continued on page 10)

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 8)

Skyhomish, to name just a few. The natives give a peculiar twist to some of the pronunciations. For instance, Sequim, a bay, river and town, is pronounced "skwim." Best named, in fisherman tradition, is the Lyre, up Port Angeles way. (Pronounced "liar.") Port Angeles, on the north shore, is the one big town on the peninsula, population 10,000.

Indian Villages

Indian villages are situated at a good many of the river mouths. They live on the salmon runs, these north country Indians, and fish from dugouts—long, slim canoes made of hollowed-out cedar logs. I saw one a full 60 feet long, not much wider across than a Texas saddle. Above tidewater, peninsula rivers are no cinch to fish. They run mostly in deep channels, the steep banks dense with alder and undergrowth. But here and there, when you learn to find 'em, are strips of gravel beach and wading riffles.

The big fish runs come in winter. But in most streams there's a May run of cutthroats up from the ocean. They come again in August-September, with steelhead and salmon. In June and July, the migratory fish are offshore. It's trolling time, then, on the bays and in the maze of branches off Puget Sound.

Three Species of Salmon

The salmon are of three species—chinook or kings, silvers and sockeyes. Chinooks grow to 40 pounds and up. The steelhead or sea-run rainbow trout averages 5 to 10 pounds, though winter fish weigh up to 20 pounds. The cutthroats are smaller, usually around 15 to 18 inches, though I've netted 'em up to 4½ pounds.

Spinners and bait are used usually, but silvers, steelhead and cutthroat are good fly takers. Hooking onto a 10-pounder on fly road is an experience no angler is likely to forget.

There are resident trout, too, in all the river upreaches and in the lakes. They range from eaters of eight to ten inches, up

(Continued on page 105)

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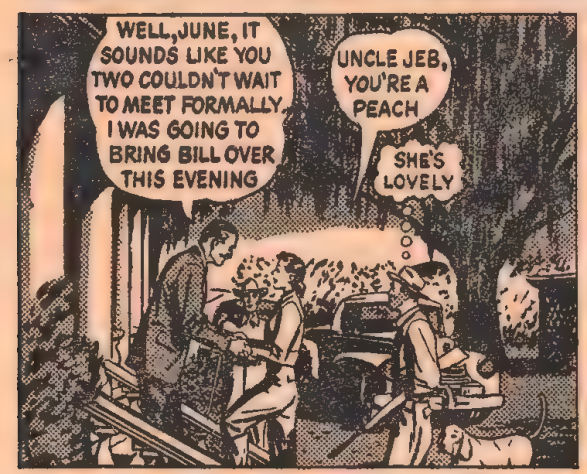
BILL STOPPED THE WILD BOAR'S CHARGE AND THEN...

WILD TURKEY HUNTING IN A SOUTHERN NATIONAL FOREST CAN HARDLY BE CLASSED AS A DANGEROUS SPORT, BUT WHEN A WOUNDED WILD BOAR INTRUDES...

WHEN WE BORROWED JEB'S CAR, WE SHOULDA TAKEN HIS TRAILER, TOO
WHY THAT'S JEB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!
THAT'S ME, ALL RIGHT!


WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
UNCLE JEB, YOU'RE A PEACH
SHE'S LOVELY

WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR DOWN HERE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

HE'S A FINE YOUNG MAN. EXCELLENT APPEARANCE AND VERY INTELLIGENT
I KNEW YOU'D LIKE HIM, COLONEL. I'VE APPROACHED HIM REGARDING A JUNIOR PARTNERSHIP

YOU ENJOY SWELL, EASY SHAVES... QUICK AND CLEAN... WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY ARE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD AND FAR OUTLAST ALL OTHERS. MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES CANNOT SCRAPE OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW-10 BLADE PACKAGE

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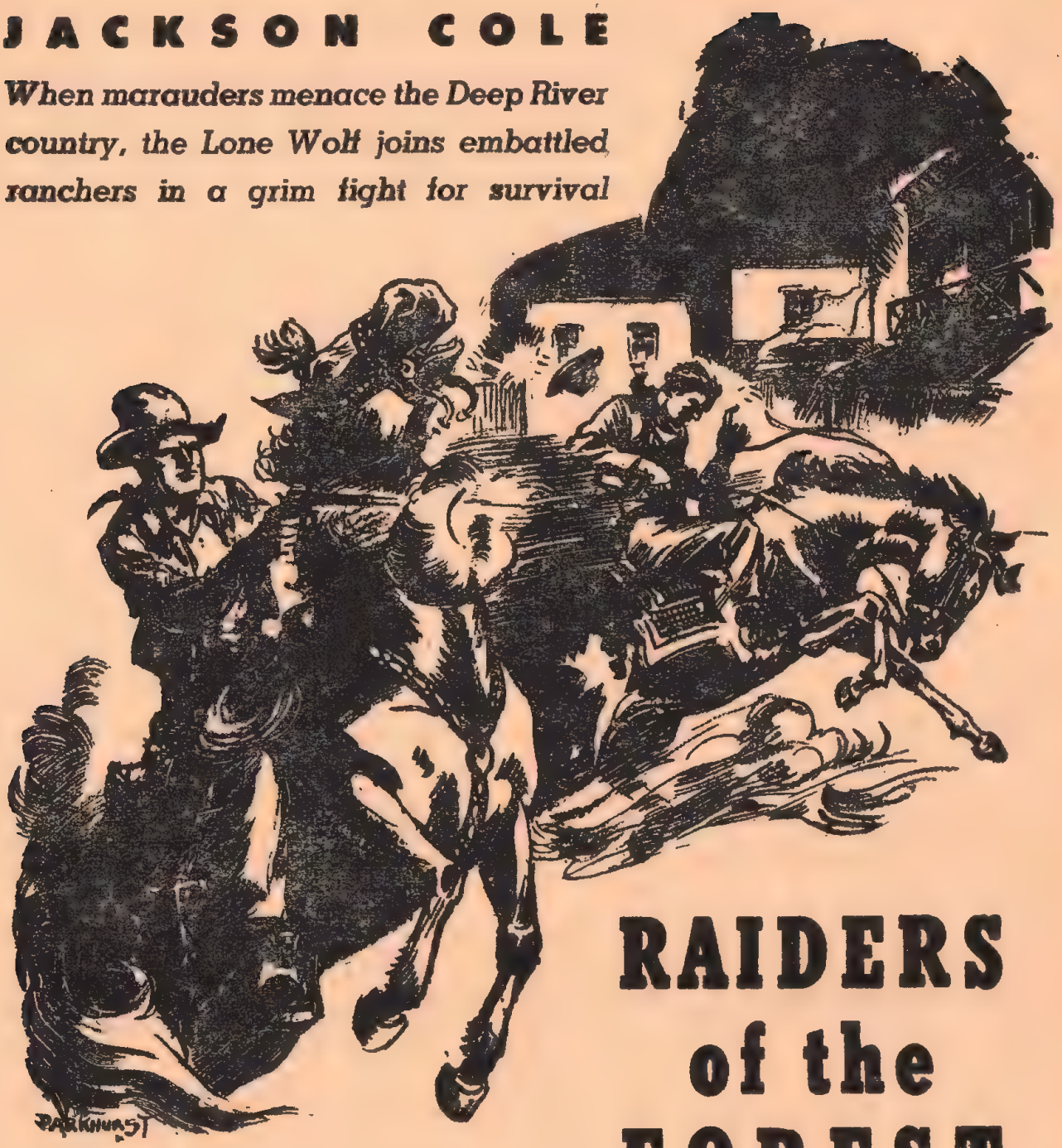
JACKSON COLE

When marauders menace the Deep River country, the Lone Wolf joins embattled ranchers in a grim fight for survival



RAIDERS of the FOREST

CHAPTER I

Gun Wedge

BAN KINNICOTT stared at the three men who had come upon him that evening. A smoky oil lamp flickered on the table in his small ranchhouse, built of timber he had cut when he had cleared his hill range long ago.

The old cowman felt that the words he spoke might prove to be his last, yet he showed no fear and did not pull his punches.

"Yeah, Pusey," he said calmly, "I live alone. Been alone a good many years now and guess I'll die that way. I s'pose I

been careless about filin' deeds and such to my land. From yore words to me I savvy yuh're tough and quick-thinkin', with no idea of lettin' other folks have their rights. Yuh're a big operator, but still yuh're an outlaw, no better than any measly trigger puller on the Border."

Kinnicott stood erect as he had his say. His hair was white, his face seamed, but his spirit was brave, unyielding. He was too experienced a judge of character to believe a speech would affect such a person as Cassius Pusey, leader of the trio before him.

Pusey listened but with a bored, superior manner, not at all touched. His black eyes fixed Kinnicott even as he whittled away at a pine faggot he had picked up. His knife was as sharp as a razor, with a short, scalpel-like blade.

A bluish stubble shaded his wide jaw, though he had shaved a few hours before. A hooked nose curved over his lipless mouth. He was tall and bony. He wore a black suit, a white shirt, and a purple silk necktie with its ends pushed under a slanting collar. He had shoved back his hat, exposing the receding hairline.

"There are thousands on thousands of square miles of valuable timber in northeast Texas, Kinnicott," he observed coldly, shaking the rounded billet at the rancher. "You're an enemy of progress. I can use this ranch. It's close to the spot where I intend to start operations. Give me a wedge, too, a foothold I need."

"Yuh'll run into the Double Dot I first thing yuh savvy." There was grim satisfaction in Kinnicott's voice.

Pusey's mouth widened, a mirthless grin. "I intend to. I'll handle Jake Irvine with no more fuss than I have you."

"Come on, Doc," snarled one of Pusey's companions. "Give the old fool his metal and let's ride. S'pose someone noses up and sees us?"

"Don't get excited, Hair-oil," warned Pusey. "We're safe enough."

"Hair-oil" Thad Carr showed nervousness, for plainly he was the nervous type who disliked taking chances.

His green suit was natty, his vest elegant, and his boots shiny. He parted his brown hair in the middle, greased to a Cupid's bow over brushed eyebrows. His mustache was waxed, his cheeks florid from high living. He was of medium height, and a paunch was beginning to show. He still prided himself on his savoir faire, however, on his way with the ladies, and on being a man of the world. In his shallow soul was a contempt for such hard-working, honest toilers as Ban Kinnicott, but he was a physical coward.

PUSEY'S other companion was of different mold. He was of giant build with beefy, rounded shoulders. Ferd Evans, known as the "Ox," looked to be possessed of a smoldering bad temper—and was. His face was a long oval, further lengthened by a black fringe of beard. Evans was a lumberjack, and his knotty, great hands and mighty limbs showed his strength. He was a brute, who could not think for himself, but was always ready to act under Doc Pusey's command.

Pusey gave Ox Evans a quick nod. Evans stepped in and Kinnicott, vainly hoping to reach the Sharps carbine hanging on his wall, jumped aside. Evans pulled a pistol, even as Pusey whipped a gun from inside his coat and fired. Together the Ox and his chief threw lead into the rancher. Kinnicott shuddered as he fell.

Hair-oil Carr licked his dry lips at this terrible scene. It took everything he had to stand his ground as the revolvers echoed in the room. Then "Doc" Pusey sprang in, crouched over the body of the man he had killed. His eyes were wide open and glaring, his breath swift. With his scalpel he tried for signs of life, but Kinnicott was done for.

"Pick up, Hair-oil," ordered Pusey. "Ox, carry him out. We'll dump him near the river, turn his pockets out so it looks like a highway robber's job. Nothing to it. This place will be mighty handy as an advance base."

Thad Carr was trembling but he obediently set about straightening the room.

"The old goat was right when he said Colonel Irvine will prove tougher, Doc," he remarked. "The Double Dot I is a big spread."

"I'll fix Irvine and the other cowmen,

too," Pusey boasted. "Soon Kinnicott's range will be in your name. His title was faulty, so I could have taken it from him in court, but that would have cost time and money. Next is Irvine. He looks strong around here, but once he's out of the way you'll see things will fold up."

They left the place in order and, carrying the blanket-swathed body of Ban Kinnicott, rode down the Deep River trail. It was a wide, clean stream flowing from the timber-clad slopes on the north, a tributary of the Brazos. The moon glinted on the water.

Doc Pusey glanced back over a hunched shoulder, gloating at the boundless wealth of those limitless forests he coveted. . . .

"Sea Lion" Gaines, ramrod of the Double Dot I, largest spread in that part of the country, pushed his black gelding, Night Star, forward to meet Lea Pope, one of the cowboys who rode for the spread. He could see that Pope was excited by the way the line rider carried himself.

Sea Lion's name on Colonel Irvine's books was Burnell, but nobody called him that unless they were looking for a rough-and-tumble. A reddish tinge to his hair told of a quick temper. He was lithe, young, and good-looking. He was wearing leather pants and blue shirt, and the big Stetson was held on his head by a chin-strap. Mexican spurs were on his half-boots.

Gaines had a habit of barking at the boys now and then, as foremen sometimes did in times of stress, but they were attached to him because he was honest, efficient and had their welfare as well as that of the ranch at heart. He could outride and outlast his men, besides being a quick thinker and able to make decisions. For these outstanding characteristics Colonel Jake Irvine had picked him as a leader.

The sun had tanned him and faint freckles showed on his leathery cheeks. When he was worried over some problem his auburn brows knitted together over a

JIM HATFIELD

straight nose, and he had a habit of twisting his under jaw when thinking but none of that detracted from his more than usual ability.

He had proved himself early in the game when he had delivered a herd of steers to Kansas for the Double Dot I, after the trail boss had been killed in a stampede. Gaines's skill, or luck, at crossing swollen rivers with his bovine charges was unquestioned, but it was his barking voice which carried over the thunder of hoofs or the roar of wind which had won him his nickname.

"What do yuh say, Lea?" he sang out, when he was within hailing distance.

Pope waved and came closer. "River's a mess," he reported. "Full of muck, and they're floatin' log rafts down her."

A wave of blood flushed Sea Lion's face. "It's them lumberjacks," he growled. "I told the Boss so. Come on, I'm goin' up to their camp. Have yuh seen Tully?"

"We can pick him up on the way," replied Pope.

WITH Lea Pope riding beside him, Sea Lion Gaines headed north, cutting across grassy, rolling range at a diagonal which soon brought them to Deep River, the Double Dot I's main water supply for the thousands of cows grazing the land. They could see small, scattered bands of cattle.

Irvine's was a well-run, sizable outfit, employing thirty riders in season. It occupied the west bank of Deep River, while on the east side were several smaller ranches, among which had been Kinnicott's small Square K. Sea Lion and the other cowboy were aware that recently highwaymen had shot old Ban. Information also had reached the Irvine ranch that lumbermen had trucked equipment through to the water-shed north of the range.

When they hit the stream they found it muddied as Lea Pope had said, and filled with branches, masses of grass, and other such muck. Sighting "Ace" Tully, another Double Dot I cowboy they signaled him, and Tully joined them as they climbed a winding trail into the woods. This was good winter pasture, the stands of yellow pine and other trees protecting the cattle and thinning the fall of snow, giving them a chance to graze.

The grim Sea Lion spared his words to save breath. He shoved Night Star on, and after a hard push they sighted the lumber camp on the east bank of Deep River. It was set at the point where the stream quieted down after rushing as a torrent from the heights.

Tents and rough shacks stood in the man-made clearing. The scarred earth had a raw, bleeding look. The bank had been leveled to take the long runways of debarked logs on which trimmed trees could be rolled to the water and fastened to make rafts. Men in old clothes and tattered hats were working at this as the three cowboys moved up the west bank to a point where they could cross the shallows.

Once across, Gaines turned back on the east bank and moved into the camp. There was a cook shack with split firewood in a large pile, a gleaming circular saw run by steam generated in a cylindrical boiler also heated by wood, a tool shed where axes could be ground and other equipment. Flat wagons had brought this across the country. It had been easy enough to avoid the few buildings along Deep River.

Through a vista made by a new trail up to the camp, Sea Lion could glimpse Ban Kinnicott's former home.

"Who's in charge here?" bellowed Sea Lion, his voice ringing in the forest.

It startled the workers who stopped in their tracks to gape at the visitors. Ace Tully and Lea Pope slouched in their saddles, backing up their foreman, waiting for the first dance if and when Gaines opened the ball.

"We got company, Ox!" called a lumberjack.

A giant of a man in leather pants supported by a length of half-inch rope, his huge feet in rubber boots and his beefy torso hardly hidden by a dirty undershirt, shuffled around the office shack. He pulled up several paces from Gaines and regarded him with a smoldering, bad-tempered glare. A black fringe of beard stuck out from his bulldog jaw. His hair was uncombed and his great knotty hands, the bulging muscles of his huge arms, showed his unusual strength. A large pistol was thrust into the rope at one side of his body, a long knife at the other.

"What yuh after, cowboy?" he demanded, with gruff contempt. "Lose some

As the Ranger pulled away from the rustlers, the cowboys, seeing a "lumberjack," let fly at him (CHAP. VII)

cows? They ain't here. Why blame us?"

This was an idea Sea Lion Gaines had not yet considered, for he had been upset only at the damage to the river. But this man the lumberjack had called Ox, and who appeared to be boss here, seemed to think he had come to complain about missing beefs. Such men as these would require a lot of meat, and the nearest animals would be a temptation. The Ox's quick denial might be a giveaway.

"If yuh're rustlin' cattle, we'll take that up later," he snapped. "This is our watershed. Yuh're rilin' the river, and us along with it."

"That so?" Evans spoke slowly, turning over every word in his mind before delivering it. "Well, waddy, I work for the Pusey Lumber Company. We happen to own this section and we'll cut it down to bedrock if we please."

THE way the Ox spoke irked Sea Lion Gaines. He was not sure of his legal standing in the matter but he was angered.

"Yuh got no right to wreck the river, hombre!" he flared. "Yuh're floatin' rafts past Double Dot I property. I'm Burnell Gaines and I ride for Colonel Jake Irvine, and I'm tellin' yuh yuh ain't slashin' any more timber out of here till we see what's what."

Ox Evans scowled. He bristled like some great animal and shook himself. He was extra tough and there was no fear in him.

"Yuh young monkey!" he growled. "You don't tell Ox Evans what he can do. Go on—get out of my camp! Next time send a man to talk to me."

The faces of Lea Pope and Ace Tully never changed expression. They looked noncommittal. Only a trained observer could have told they had inwardly set themselves for action. A dozen of Evans's toughs had slowly filtered up. All were armed with pistols and knives. They apparently were preparing for a fight.

Sea Lion Gaines looked boyish, but he, too, was tough. He had to be, to run such a spread as the Double Dot I and survive on the frontier, on the cattle trails and in the wilderness. He pulled his foot from the tapped stirrup and slid to the ground, stepping up to the hulking Ox, who was perhaps double his weight.

At Sea Lion's slender waist rode a cartridge belt, the open holster holding a walnut-stocked six-shooter.

CHAPTER II

Straight Talk—and Straight Shooting

IT WAS Gaines's policy not to annoy his employer with problems he could settle himself. He had wanted to discover just what was going on up here in this lumber camp, and then Ox Evans had directly challenged him. He could scarcely ignore that.

"Yuh should savvy better than to go off half-cocked, Fatty," Sea Lion said, and his voice was silky now.

The Ox showed his tobacco-stained fangs. He made a sudden lunge and his straight-arm threw Gaines back, would have knocked him from his footing if his high-heeled boots had not checked his slide.

Sea Lion threw himself in then. His fists, as hard as seasoned leather, smacked into Evans's face, the blows sharp and clean. The Ox roared, more annoyed than hurt, though the punches stung him. He put down his head and reached for Sea Lion who skillfully sidestepped, nimble as a wolf after a buffalo bull. The Ox wanted to close in and use his bear hug to crush his wiry opponent, but Gaines was too quick for him, slashing him again and again.

Puffing after chasing Gaines in circles, Evans lost his head and reached for the pistol in his rope belt. Sea Lion sprang back, beat him to the draw without half trying.

"Yuh fool!" he mocked. "I could kill yuh easy."

Lea Pope and Ace Tully suddenly acted. They had been watching the scrap, but also had kept an eye on the Ox's men. The cowboys whipped out their six-shooters and took aim.

"We'll drill the first man who raises his gun!" Pope called in a strident voice.

For several of Evans's men, behind Sea Lion, had started to draw their weapons. Under the Double Dot I's Colts, the lumberjacks froze.

"Remember what I told yuh, Ox," warned Gaines. "Quit cuttin'. I'll be back."

He gave his two cowboys a nod, pouched his pistol and sprang into saddle. Ox Evans was shaking with fury at his defeat. His eyes darted sparks of hate.

Sea Lion and his men swung their horses, starting up the river toward the ford above the deep channel. They crossed and moved down on the west side. Through the trees they could see Ox Evans's camp, but the boss and his lumberjacks were now hidden.

A rifle bullet zinged through the leaves, a foot from Sea Lion Gaines' Stetson. He glimpsed Ox Evans as the giant ducked back behind the engine boiler. The Ox had tried for him with a rifle. It was long range for a Colt, but the moving cowmen opened fire in reply, for a volley of cracking shots from the camp now was sending lead all around them. Sea Lion's lead held them down, however, and soon the woods intervened.

"What next?" inquired Pope, reloading his pistol before slipping it into holster.

"I'm goin' to the White House," Gaines said gruffly.

"Yuh should have drilled that big lummox when he tried to draw on yuh," growled Tully, his face red with justifiable anger.

Sea Lion shrugged. He was not a killer, although he would fight to defend himself and his brand. And a foreman did not go around shooting everybody with whom he had a dispute. First he would need to talk to Colonel Irvine.

The "White House," as the whitewashed home of Rancher Jake Irvine was called by his men, did not stand on Deep River, but on a tributary creek a couple of miles from the mother stream. Spring floods were thereby avoided and the higher ground was a pleasant spot from which to contemplate the mighty range.

The ranchhouse was of one story, with four wings radiating from the central structure, long verandas, and fireplace chimneys. Subsidiary buildings were neatly kept, barns and bunkhouse were in repair and freshly painted. There were corrals, corn cribs, a smithy, storage shacks, a springhouse, and wagons and buggies were lined in an open-front shed. All equipment was in order and in place. The Double Dot I was a large, well-run business.

Sea Lion Gaines dropped rein in the side yard and stalked with high-heeled gait to the front porch. He knocked on the door.

"Come in!" a girl's voice called.

Sea Lion lifted the latch and stepped inside. He swept the Stetson from his crisp reddish hair, smiling, showing no sign of his inner tension. The girl sitting there, sewing on a blue dress, was June Irvine, the Colonel's daughter. She had dark, curly hair and violet eyes with long lashes, was, in fact, as pretty as a picture. She was more than that to Gaines who realized how much he loved her, although no word of that had been spoken. Some day, though he hoped to make his pile, and then he meant to ask June to marry him.

SHE wore a plain green dress and slippers.

"Hello, Sea Lion," she said brightly. "Did you want to see Dad?"

"Yes'm. Is he busy?"

"He's in the study. Go right on in." She pursed her red lips as she wet the thread to push the end through the needle.

Her mother came and stood in the doorway leading to the rear of the house. Mrs. Irvine was somewhat heavier than her daughter but she was small and neat and had the same curly hair and appealing eyes. She waved to Sea Lion, who was a favorite of hers, almost as dear to her as her own two children—June who was nineteen, and Jake Junior, twelve, who was the apple of the Colonel's eye.

Gaines crossed the living room and tapped on the office door.

"Come in!" the Colonel called from inside.

As Sea Lion entered, Colonel Jake Irvine, owner of the Double Dot I, looked up from the papers he had been examining. He was a big, breezy Texan, florid of complexion, generous to a fault. As a youth he had served in the Confederate Army and near the end of the Civil War had been breveted lieutenant-colonel. By hard work and ability, after the war he had carved out his ranch.

Irvine, at ease in his den, wore a brown shirt open at the throat, comfortable blue pants, and his feet were thrust into carpet

slippers. His black hair was salted by the years, as was his cropped mustache. His eyes were intensely blue and clear, with shrewd wrinkles radiating from the corners.

Sea Lion closed the door as he did not wish to alarm the women by what he had to say.

"Hair in the butter, Boss," he told the Colonel. "A bunch of lumbermen are up at Kinnicott's old place. They're roilin' the river. Yuh savvy what happens when trees are cut the way they're doin'. Those slopes will wash away and wreck the range in no time flat."

He went on, giving a terse sketch of what had occurred. Irvine listened, his mien grave, the lines between his brows deepening.

"I didn't plug the cuss," finished Sea Lion. "I want to find out just how far yuh wish to go."

"Huh." Irvine was turning it over in his keen mind. He nodded at last. "Yuh handled it well. I've been wonderin' what was goin' to happen. Ban Kinnicott was s'posed to have been killed by robbers. Then these hombres turn up as owners of his place. Gives 'em a toe-hold. One thing's shore, we can't stomach those lumbermen. They'll wash us away. Well, I ain't goin' to sit here and go bust. I'll fight."

Sea Lion was satisfied. He would obey orders.

"What's yore plan, Boss?" he inquired, fixing himself a quirly.

"The only way for 'em to get that lumber out is to raft down Deep River to Sandtown or else truck across the range. I hold the west bank of the river and my friends hold the other. Burley's Circle B is south of Kinnicott's, Horseface Tate's Slanted T is next, then Vern Nolan's VN. Except for Kinnicott's land we control the forests. The boys will back me up. We'll string a boom across the stream and block their rafts."

The Colonel pulled on his cowboots and his leather jacket, and buckled on a gunbelt holding a holstered Colt. He picked up a Winchester carbine, dropping shells for it into his pockets, and clapped his Stetson on his head.

"Call in the boys, Sea Lion," he ordered. "We're goin' to work. . . ."

Twenty-four hours later, the Double Dot I had a heavy log boom, fastened with rawhide thongs and anchored to strong posts, across Deep River several miles below the lumber camp. Colonel Irvine surveyed it with pride, nodding to "Horseface" Tate, a neighbor, a tall, spare man with a long face and grim eyes. Tate's smaller spread lay across the stream.

"That'll stop 'em. We'll set a guard on both sides, Tate."

"Suits me, Colonel." The opposite anchorage for the boom was on Tate's land.

Armed cowboys were left to keep an eye on the blockade. Sea Lion Gaines was in charge of the sentries, although his other duties were numerous and he did not remain on twenty-four-hour duty but rode out now and again to see how it was going. By evening four lashed log rafts had piled up against the boom and the muck in the diver jammed into this.

IRVINE and Sea Lion expected a quick reaction, and it was not long in coming. The following afternoon a wrangler on watch at the ranch reported a large party of riders approaching from the Sandtown trail.

Sea Lion Gaines, standing on the front porch, studied the visitors.

"There's Ox Evans, the hombre I had the words with, Boss," he informed. "Some are lumberjacks that were up above, but I don't savvy all of 'em."

"We'll soon find out who they are," growled Jake Irvine.

Twenty horsemen, all armed, tagged behind a trio of leaders, one of these being the Ox. Nearing the ranch, they waved in friendly fashion. Irvine raised his hand in reply and the main party stopped. Three riders came slowly in.

A tall, bony man in a dark suit and straight-brimmed hat seemed to be in command. Bluish stubble shaded his heavy jaw, a hooked nose curved over a lipless mouth. He dismounted, as did one of his comrades, but the Ox stayed in his saddle, betraying no emotion.

"Colonel Irvine?" said the bony man, showing his teeth in a wide grin. He thrust out a hand as he started up the steps. "I am Dr. Cassius Pusey, president of the Pusey Lumber Company. This is my friend Thad Carr, a salesman for my organization."

Sea Lion Gaines, a cigarette drooling smoke from his lips, slouched against a post, secretly amused at the way Irvine ignored Doc Pusey's outstretched hand.

Thad Carr was a dude in a fancy green suit, carpet vest, and shiny boots. His brown hair was greased to a Cupid's bow and his mustache was waxed, his cheeks florid. He displayed some nervousness, small signs telling Gaines that Carr was worried about coming so close to the opposing guns.

Pusey quickly came to the point. "My boys are floating timber downriver," he explained smoothly. "A boom has been strung over the right of-way, blocking us, and armed men are holding it. I'm sure you can't mean to prevent us from using a public outlet, for the water is just that."

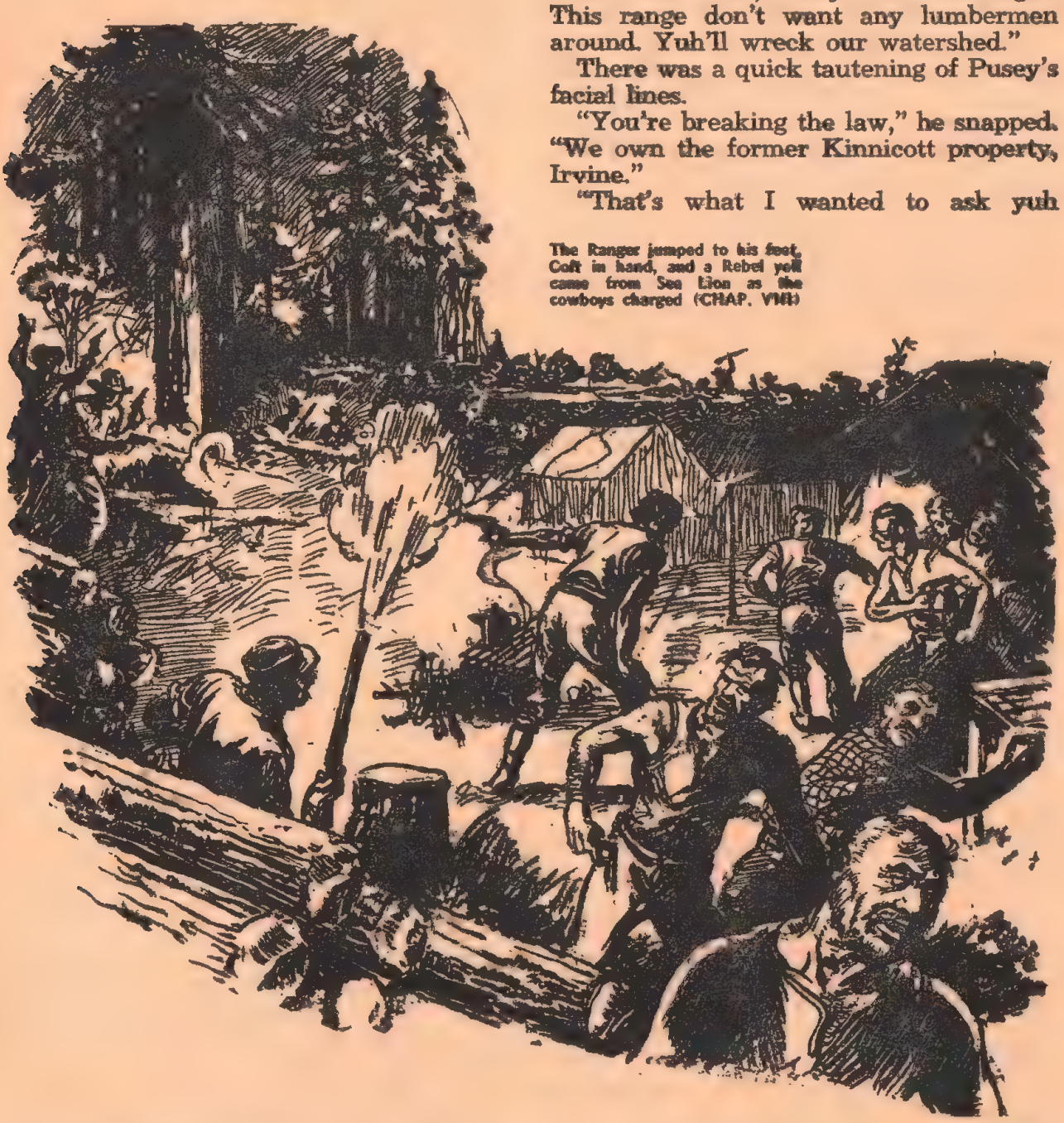
Jake Irvine had sized them up. "That's what I aim to do, Pusey. I'll talk straight. This range don't want any lumbermen around. Yuh'll wreck our watershed."

There was a quick tautening of Pusey's facial lines.

"You're breaking the law," he snapped. "We own the former Kinnicott property, Irvine."

"That's what I wanted to ask yuh about." The Colonel nodded. "How did yuh come to grab it? Ban was a good friend of mine and somebody killed him. Right off, you move in."

"Are you insinuating we had anything to do with Kinnicott's death?" said Pusey coldly. "It so happens that my friend Carr here was in Sandtown and looked into the



The Ranger jumped to his feet, Colt in hand, and a Rebel yell came from Sea Lion as the cowboys charged (CHAP. VIII)

title to Kinnicott's ranch. It was not recorded properly, so he exercised his rights as a citizen of this state to claim it. My organization has leased from him and we aim to cut that timber."

Irvine smiled but he was as angry inside as Pusey was. Sea Lion Gaines could fairly feel the antagonism between the two men. He kept careful watch, in case shooting started. He had alerted the Double Dot I cowboys and they were waiting nearby.

"Yuh can't come through from the other side, because the mountains block yuh." drawled Irvine. "The only way out is through Sandtown. We hold that. Better sashay, Pusey. We don't want yuh."

Pusey saw that protests or arguments were fruitless, that Irvine could neither be bluffed nor cajoled. If he had had any idea of making a fight he abandoned it, for Sea Lion Gaines, the Colonel, and his cowboys looked salty. Pusey shrugged and, with a curt nod, turned and went to his mount, trailed by Carr. They rode off toward Sandtown. . . .

TWO days after that call at the Double Dot I, Sea Lion Gaines escorted the night relief toward Deep River, under a lemon moon. They had been quiet days, too quiet, Sea Lion thought.

The gentle slope to the river was bathed in silver light, and he could make out the black shapes of posts anchoring the boom. He had several men on watch, while on the east bank Horseface Tate's boys kept vigil.

Suddenly a man down there gave a hoarse, alarmed shout.

"What's that, floatin' down?"

"A raft!" yelled another. "That's a fuse sputterin'!"

Sea Lion Gaines glimpsed the bluish trail of burning powder. A carbine flamed from the darkness up the stream, and abruptly the battle burst upon them. Yells and cracking guns, thundering hoofs, came from both sides of Deep River. Pusey was attacking!

A wounded cowboy screeched. Sea Lion pulled a Colt and cocked it, ready for action, his four men behind him also ready. Lead was shrieking in the cool air as they swept into the fray.

Something irresistible brushed Sea Lion off Night Star, the powerful horse staggering and falling. Then the river seemed to explode. As the mighty blast echoed across the range, the stunned Sea Lion sat there, struggling for clarity of mind, for control over his muscles. The enemy must have blown up the boom barricade. Mounted foes came driving in, guns raging.

The gasping Sea Lion pushed himself up, gripping his Colt.

CHAPTER III

Ranger Job

CHIEF of the Texas Rangers at Austin, Captain Bill McDowell, glowered at the map of the Lone Star State as though holding that innocent chart responsible for what was happening on the land it represented.

Actually his thoughts were far away, ranging free across plains and mountains, through the great forests. It was about the only real traveling McDowell did these days, for age had finally pinned him to his desk. In his younger years he would have snorted, leaped on a horse, and ridden himself to settle such matters as were now bothering him.

Now he must despatch aides to enforce the law. Yet he was familiar with all sections of the mighty empire, and his shrewd ability to diagnose complaints and figure out what was necessary to cure them made him invaluable to Texas.

He had already bellowed orders to the clerk in the anteroom to send one of said proxies. As he caught a soft tread he swung to face the tall man who entered the office.

Ranger Jim Hatfield was McDowell's star agent and the old captain felt that no one else could settle an outlaw's hash in a more satisfactory manner than the great officer. Hatfield was indeed built for just such a job—over six feet, broad of shoulder, tapering to the fighting man's slim waist. His rugged face, brown as a berry, was softened by a wide mouth, indicative of his disposition which was generous and kind—except toward lawbreakers.

He wore a freshly washed blue shirt and red bandanna, leather trousers, and shiny half-boots with high heels. Twin Colts reposed in his holsters and he could

handle those weapons with magic speed and accuracy.

Hatfield had a keen brain able to judge delicate situations, solve the hardest problems posed for the law. His alert, gray-green eyes now fixed McDowell inquiringly.

At McDowell's wave, Hatfield took a chair and pushed back his hat, letting the chinstrap loose in its runner. The black hair exposed was sheening with youthful vitality.

McDowell pointed to the map, his gnarled finger coming to rest at a spot northeast of the capital.

"This is Sandtown, Hatfield. It's a small settlement on Deep River, a tributary of the Brazor. Serves the cattle country through there, savvy?"

The end of the finger described a circle about the black dot marking Sandtown.

"North and northeast of the cleared range," the Captain went on, "lie the forests. A quarter of Texas is wooded, yuh savvy—sixty-four thousand square miles of territory! From the Red River down, as far west as a line runnin' south through Austin, then east to the Gulf Plains, are vast stands of woods, yellow pine, cabinet woods such as maple, oak, walnut, ash, beech, elm, sycamore, hickory, poplar."

He paused for breath, his rimed brows knitted.

"Worth many fortunes, savvy? And there are always hoggish hombres ready to snatch natural resources for themselves, come what may. Been too much of it. I hear there's a new timber lobby kickin' up in the state legislature. This fight I'm interested in now, and want you to look into, is one that's started between timber cutters and ranchers livin' on the edge of the forests. The lifeline of Texas is cattle. I favor cowmen if they're decent men, and they should be upheld against outsiders who try to grab their range. Most of these lumber companies don't give a hoot how they destroy the woods and they leave a ruined land behind 'em.

"I've had complaints from Colonel Jake Irvine of the Double Dot I and more in that district. A rancher named Ban Kinnicott has been killed and others fired on. Looks like a test case, Hatfield, to prove whether settlers can be ruthlessly shoved out by powerful interests. If they win in Deep River, they can win everywhere."

Hatfield absorbed the picture while McDowell watched him. The case called for a diplomat as well as a fighter, and McDowell knew that the Ranger filled the bill.

When Hatfield finally had all the facts at his command, he took leave of his chief and went out to the sunny yard to a handsome golden gelding, his war horse. Goldy was a swift steed, and had the strength to carry the big officer on his missions. A pack rolled in a slicker rode at the cantle while saddle-bags held further equipment for the field. A carbine in a boot was protected by an oilskin case.

JIM HATFIELD mounted and rode off, with a wave to his chief.

Bright sunlight shone on the blue Colorado where Austin reposed in her amphitheater of pretty hills. It kissed the capitol dome and other prominent structures as the Ranger dropped rein before a neat cottage on the east side of the city.

He rapped on the door and a tall, thin youth of around sixteen opened up and uttered a joyous warwhoop. His features were freckled, his nose turned up. His hair had been bleached a tow color by the weather, but his levis and coarse shirt were clean.

"Afternoon, Buck," the Ranger greeted, grinning.

"Whoopee, we're ridin'!" howled "Buck" Robertson.

Hatfield had once assisted Buck and his sister Anita, and the three had become fast friends. This was of special value to young Buck who was courageous and loved danger, for running with the Ranger gave an outlet to his natural high spirits and kept him on the right path. Some day Buck hoped to become a Texas Ranger himself. To aid him in this ambition Hatfield took the young fellow with him, whenever it was feasible.

Buck led the way to the parlor.

"Sis, I'm goin' to saddle up, we're pullin' out," the lad said importantly to the girl who smiled up at the rugged Ranger.

Anita Robertson was a beautiful girl with golden hair and amber eyes, and in the first loveliness of young womanhood. She was a schoolteacher who now was teaching in Austin, thanks to the interest

of the Ranger. She welcomed Hatfield's interest in her younger brother, also, since they were orphans and she had sole charge of Buck.

"Where to now?" she inquired, as they all sat down together.

Hatfield gave her a quick resumé of his intended mission, skipping the danger angles.

"Can yuh spare Buck?" he asked.

"Oh yes," she said eagerly. "Being with you is the best education he could get. And I know he's safe with you, Jim."

She would not let them start until she had cooked a hot meal for them, then she watched as they rode out of Austin, Buck pushing gaily along on his chunky gray mustang, the Ranger turning to answer the girl's good-by wave. . . .

It was night when Jim Hatfield and Buck Robertson finally came on Sandtown. As Captain McDowell had observed, it was not much of a place. A single-track railway spur reached the settlement that crouched on the east bank of Deep River.

A brisk wind blew in from the northwest and Buck grunted, putting down his head, rubbing at his eyes. The next moment the Ranger did the same, for the breeze carried gritty particles which stung their cheeks and blinded them temporarily.

"I see where she got her name," remarked Hatfield drily.

A wooden bridge crossed the deep stream. There was a grassy commons in the town, fronted by wooden buildings. Oil lanterns hanging from poles served as street lights, and more illumination came from the windows of saloons, before the largest of which was a prominent sign:

THE WOLF BAR AND HOTEL

There was a store, a livery stable, a hardware emporium, a small lockup and town hall.

The road skirted the river, as they headed north to the center of the town. On the left was a narrow ditch through which water coursed, a race which turned a creaking, large wooden paddle-wheel. The shaft of the wheel disappeared inside a barnlike building. It could have been a flour mill, but the Ranger saw piles of sawdust and his flared nostrils caught the distinctive odor of fresh-cut wood.

It was a sawmill, and stacks of newly made lumber stood in the yard. This fitted in with what he had come about. Logs could be floated to the mill from the hills, roughed into lumber, then the products loaded on flatcars and shipped to market.

The sawmill was dark and Hatfield had no warning of danger and no reason to expect it, since he had not yet shown himself in the vicinity. He was staring at the unpainted wooden side wall. The low creak of the water wheel, the soughing of the wind, the music and voices from the Wolf and other hot spots filled his ears. He was thinking only of the hearty meal and refreshing sleep he and Buck were anticipating, for both were weary after the long, fast run they had made.

Buck was between Hatfield and the bulk of the mill. They had slowed a bit when the Ranger had shown interest in the place, looking it over in passing.

THERE was no challenge, nothing to tip Hatfield. One instant they were riding along. The next Buck yipped, his cry of pain choking in his throat as he sagged. He had been hit, no saying how badly. The gray mustang snorted and reared and the youth slid from his saddle. The gray shied but stopped as one of Buck's booted feet caught in the tapped stirrup and dragged the horse back.

From a dark crack between the upright siding of the sawmill a brief gunflash streaked as a hidden, unknown enemy opened fire.

Hatfield was next. He sensed that without further information. The drygulcher's carbine snapped and flamed in his direction.

But the Ranger had pulled on his rein and the powerful golden sorrel rose on his hind legs, pivoting instantly in obedience to knee pressure and touch. The second bullet missed Hatfield by a foot, shrieking past in the night.

With astonishing but practised speed Hatfield whipped a Colt and began firing. He aimed at the spot from which he had seen the flashes, once, twice and again. He was under stress, yet his brain was cool and his trained muscles were unhampered by tension. So unerring was he that evidently his lead rattled the man in the mill, for the third and last shot was

really wild, and whoever was shooting jumped back. The Ranger threw two more at the blank wall without drawing a reply.

Having gained a brief breather he wasted not a moment. Leaning far over on one side, he seized Buck's arm and pulled his youthful comrade back into the saddle. He spurted away, drawing the chunky mustang along and supporting Buck with a strong arm so he could not fall.

With such a welcome to Sandtown and with Buck hurt, he could not tell how seriously, he dared not keep on into the settlement. The shooting had been heard and armed men were issuing from the Wolf and such places to see what was going on. The unknown gun artist who had blasted the visitors would no doubt have friends, and Hatfield could not chance capture with Buck helpless.

The drygulcher was watching his hasty retreat and a carbine bullet followed the Ranger. Then he was past the sawmill and in shadow to the south, on the road over which they had come. He glanced back, his chinstrap taut around the hard jaw line.

"See yuh later," he muttered. A cold rage was upon him.

His first object was to put space between his foes and himself, so he kept riding until he reached a stretch of dirt highway where yellow pine woods fringed both ditches. The evergreens grew thick here and close to the ground. The needle droppings of centuries had formed a firm underfooting which did not retain tracks the way dirt and sand might. He dismounted and found a narrow alley through which he could lead the horses, with Buck lying limp across the gray.

The sharp points of the pine needles stabbed at his eyes and cheeks as he shoved on through by force. The rustlings were loud in his ears and he kept veering to avoid the brown trunks or patches where the branches jammed too thickly.

Away from the road at last he dropped rein.

CHAPTER IV

The Unknown

WORKING by sense of touch, for it was pitch-black under the massive canopy of towering pines, Hatfield unfolded and spread Buck's blanket on the yielding needles. Then he lifted Buck gently to this bed. The aromatic odor of resin filled his flared nostrils, and above him the wind soughed through the swaying tree tops.

He listened. If the bushwhackers were pursuing the fugitives the clop of hoofs would reach him, but he heard only the distant sounds in Sandtown. There was alarm in him, for he was devoted to his young friend, and the prospect of facing Anita if the lad died or was crippled was unbearable.

He began feeling for the wound. Buck was breathing and his heart beating. There were no wet blood areas on his clothing. Then the Ranger located the jagged furrow on the left side of Buck's head where

[*Turn page*]

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a carbine bullet had slashed just under his Stetson brim, knocking him unconscious.

Hatfield again listened and all seemed at peace. He chanced a match, cupping the tiny flame in his long hand. The tentlike space under the pines, with myriad dead-brown branches and sprouts killed because of lack of sunlight, the small knoll they were on, with an upthrust of reddish rock, showed in the flickering light. Pushing off Buck's hat he could see the wound had cut the scalp but the slug had not damaged the skull. It had hardly kissed Buck, but the shock had been enough to down the young fellow.

Relief flooded Hatfield. "It ain't bad," he thought. "I can pull him through."

He had a couple of candle stubs in his pack and lighted one, gluing it by a drop of its own tallow to a flat stone. By this light he attended to the wound, cleaning the edges with water and binding it with clean strips of cloth from a spare shirt tail. Buck twitched and muttered uneasily.

Hatfield rolled a quirly and, after lighting it, blew out the candle and squatted beside his friend.

"Sis! Jim!" For some time Buck's low calls were incoherent. It was a half-hour before he really regained his senses.

"Yuh're all right, Buck," the Ranger said then, gently. "Take it easy. Lie still. All yuh need is to rest."

"What happened?" whispered Buck.

"Yuh got a little scalp crease, that's all. Nothin' to worry about." Hatfield patted the boy's hand.

"I remember now. We were ridin' by that sawmill."

"Right. A drygulcher opened on us. But save yore breath. Can yuh sleep?"

"I guess so. Wish I had a drink of water."

Hatfield brought his canteen. Buck drank thirstily and soon fell into a deep sleep, after Hatfield had covered him with his own blanket and slicker.

"He'll need a couple days to rest up," decided the Ranger. "This is no place for him to lie."

Buck needed warm broths and strengthening foods, too. Besides, if it rained he would be soaked, and anyway ants, flies and other insects would swarm over him. Hatfield concluded he must find a real haven for Buck.

"Mebbe Irvine's Double Dot I would be it," he mused. "There should be women there, and they shore make the best nurses."

When Buck was sound asleep, the Ranger moved off, picked up Goldy, and shoved out on the dirt road roughly paralleling Deep River's east bank. The railroad track was built along the ridge over the long, shallow valley.

AS yet he had only an approximate idea as to the location of Irvine's ranch, for he had intended questioning a bartender or some other native about the location of the place. He needed local information, or a guide to run him quickly to the Double Dot I. And he was furious, too, at the unprovoked attack, determined to straighten this out.

Mounting the sorrel he again started for Sandtown, this time on the prowl, and with loaded guns, ready for a scrap. Before reaching the outskirts he pulled off the highway and drew as near as possible to the sawmill before dismounting. He kept low as he closed in, silently moving in the shadows of brush fringing Deep River.

There was activity around the sawmill. A couple of dozen men were in the yard, cigarette ends glowing ruby red as smokers inhaled. The murmur of voices came on the wind. He observed them for a while, trying to make out what was going on. Then three of them detached themselves from the main bunch and, jumping on saddled mustangs, went up the road. Hatfield could see their figures against the town lights.

He decided to trail the trio as the others settled down around the sawmill, some spreading blankets as though to camp. He backed off and, picking up Goldy, circled east until he could make it to the rear of the Wolf Saloon.

Again leaving his mount he stole through byways to the back entrance. Glancing through an open window he could see the long bar, with booted customers in range or town clothing strung along it. Music came from violins and a guitar, gamblers plied their trade. Sawdust was on the floor, and second-story rooms were lit by lamp or candle.

He was sure that the three from the

sawmill had come to the Wolf. One tall figure had been especially distinctive in a flat-crowned "Nebraska" hat. As he watched, a man in just such a headpiece backed away from the crowded bar, turning as he wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve.

"That's one of 'em," thought Hatfield.

He was a tall, rangy man, though his legs were bowed through long accommodation to a horse's barrel ribs. Brown chaps protected blue whipcord trousers from saddle rubbing, and high-heeled, expensive black boots with Mexican cartwheel spurs gleamed on his feet. His blue shirt was of wool, he wore sleeve garters, and a brown leather vest of Border cut. Crossed cartridge belts supported his black-stocked Colt revolvers.

In the lamplight Hatfield could clearly make out his features—the triangular face with a crooked set to the jaw, pale-blue, frosty eyes and a thin wedge of a nose. His mouth was a gash above a chin which jutted to such a degree it was almost a deformity.

He had buck teeth which he showed as he signaled two friends, no doubt those who had come up with him. They were in range garb, heavily armed, tough of aspect. One of them who was wearing leather and a sandy Stetson, was burly; the other was smaller, wiry, and quick of movement. The burly one sported a cropped black mustache, and his deep-set eyes were close together.

They came toward the back of the Wolf but did not leave the building. Instead, the leader went up a flight of stairs, followed by his men. The Ranger was interested in them, for he thought they could supply the answer to the episode at the sawmill.

He drew off and hunted for a way to reach the flat roof of the structure. The upper windows were close to the overhang. Up there he might overhear what went on in the rooms below. But when he came to the corner he saw not only a perpendicular rainpipe but a balcony which ran around three sides of the hotel. It was only a few feet over his stretched arm and, with the help of the pipe, he gained a hold and pulled himself over the low railing.

A loud, brash voice drew him as a magnet draws steel. An open window at the side gave out on the balcony and Hatfield crept close enough to peer in and see men inside. The room held the sparse furnishings of such a frontier hostelry—a bunk and a commode, a bench with a carpetbag on it, bottles and tin cups on a round center table where burned an oil lamp with a glass reservoir.

"Yes suh, Carr, yuh don't need to worry, with Guarantee Gus Stack on the job!" announced that brash voice.

It belonged to the rangy, bowlegged fellow in the Nebraska hat. He stood by the table, the other two near the closed door.

"I got thirty riders," the man went on, "and I'll fetch in as many more as we need. I guarantee to clean out them cussed cowmen in jig time or yore money back. That's me—that's why they call me Guarantee. Down on the Nueces I won a war like this and wound it up in a week. My boys are so tough the grizzly bears run howlin' for cover when we come along. And I see to things myself." "Guarantee Gus" Stack was certainly confident, and he certainly did not dislike himself, thought the listening Ranger. Rumors had come to Ranger headquarters about Guarantee Gus, but until this moment he had managed to avoid direct contact with McDowell's agents.

THE man Stack addressed as Carr was of different type. Carr wore a natty suit and fine vest, and a bow tie was at his throat. His brown hair was oiled and brushed, his mustache waxed. His florid cheeks showed the effects of high living, and a paunch pushed out his coat. He seemed rather nervous, decided the spying Ranger.

"You've had a look around, then?" asked Carr.

"Yes suh. Speed is my motto—speed and deliverin' the goods."

Hatfield gathered there had been a preliminary interview between Stack and Carr.

"I thought we could do business, Stack. What's your fee?"

"Don't let a little thing like that worry yuh!" cried Guarantee Gus. "I pay my men thirty a month, and they keep what they pick up. As for me I'm easy pleased."

He did not look it, thought the Ranger. And Carr put his tongue in a pink cheek, and did some fast figuring.

"Let's see. Thirty men at thirty per, that's nine hundred a month plus what we pay you. I s'pose you expect us to supply ammunition and grub?"

"That's understood." Guarantee Stack turned out his hands in a gesture which showed he considered this to be quibbling. He seemed most eager to sign up with Carr. "Irvine's Double Dot I is a big outfit, but we'll have 'em pushin' up daisies inside of three weeks. Them little spreads that have throwed in with Irvine will be easy, once we smash the Colonel. As yuh said, yuh've run into a snag. Yore lumberjacks can't fight on hossback the way cowboys can, but that's our specialty. I guarantee it."

Carr was still hesitant, so with the air of a man delivering a cinching argument, Guarantee Gus turned and jerked his head at a burly tough by the door, one of those the Ranger had seen downstairs.

"This here is Pillbottle Deven," he said. "One of my best hands. This afternoon when we rode out for a look-see at the range I left him and Shorty to guard our blanket rolls at yore sawmill. Yuh heard that gunfire a while ago? That was Pillbottle. He downed two of Irvine's waddies who were sneakin' up on yuh. Throwed the bodies in the river. Just a free sample of what we can do."

Guarantee Gus slapped Deven on the back, throwing an affectionate arm across his beefy shoulders. Deven's close-set eyes shone with vanity, and the black mustache curled up as he simpered.

"Guarantee warned me to watch out for them cowboy cusses, suh," he said, "and so I was right on the target. They went faggin' off like the heel flies was after 'em but I downed both, one slug for each."

Carr was deeply impressed. "Good work, Pillbottle! Tell you what, Stack. The price is all right with me, but subject to Doc Pusey's agreein', savvy? He's the boss."

"That suits me. Let's have a drink on it."

NEXT ISSUE

THE RIVER LAUGHS

An Exciting Action Novelet

by BARRY SCOBEE

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

The four men in the hotel room poured stiff slugs of liquor from the bottle on the table and pledged one another. Guarantee Stack talked a lot, boasting of his prowess. The angry Ranger had had a good look at "Pillbottle" Deven, who had wantonly opened fire on Buck and himself as they had approached Sandtown. Probably the gunslinger had been drinking as he awaited his chief's return to the sawmill.

The deaths of two innocent men, for Deven had had no way of knowing the riders he had fired on were Irvine's followers, did not appear to worry Deven, Stack or Carr. While Deven and Stack were lying, since Buck and Hatfield had escaped, the ruthless savagery of Guarantee Gus Stack's band was evident.

Guarantee Gus smacked his lips over the whisky.

"Ah, that's mighty good! When can I pow-wow with Doc Pusey?"

"He'll be along in a day or two. I'll send for you. Meanwhile, pull out of here and hide in the pine woods east of the settlement. We want to s'prise Irvine."

"Fine."

Hatfield was lurking in the shadowed passage south of the Wolf when Guarantee Gus emerged from the Wolf, jumped on his horse, and rode to the sawmill. The Ranger hunted for Pillbottle and "Shorty," found they had stopped to play roulette. He did not want to show himself in Sandtown now, for both Carr and Stack had toughs on watch who might decide he belonged to the opposition.

After a few twirls, Deven quit playing, having lost money, but Shorty had a run of luck. For a time Pillbottle watched but, growing restless, crossed to the bar and threw down a couple of drinks. He rolled a smoke, lighted up, went and spoke to Shorty, who shook his head, intent on the game. Then Deven shrugged and came outside. He was yawning as he flicked the ash from his quirly and ducked under the hitchrail.

Hatfield quickly followed. Deven had a hand on his horn, perparatory to mounting, as the Ranger bobbed up.

"Wait a jiffy, Pillbottle," ordered Hatfield quietly.

He was still furious at the injury done Buck. The gunslinger was not sure what this meant, as he turned to look up into the tall man's set face.

CHAPTER V

Guide

PERHAPS something familiar about the officer's silhouette or simply an outlaw's native caution warned Pillbottle Deven. He cursed gruffly and tried to get into position to draw.

But the Ranger's Colt barrel glinted in the yellow glow from the Wolf's windows and the muzzle rammed into Pillbottle's short ribs. The fact that this was the man who had shot Buck did not make Hatfield gentler. Pillbottle squealed, and his breath was driven from his lungs.

"Take it easy!" he gasped. "Who are yuh? What yuh want?"

"Yuh're comin' with me, Deven. One move and I'll sieve yuh, savvy? Yuh eyeballer!"

Hatfield was in a hurry to get his prisoner away from in front of the Wolf, for Shorty or other help might come out at any moment. Pillbottle no doubt hoped for this as he sought to temporize, though he dared not budge with the hard metal circle against his back.

"Aw, what have I ever done to yuh, mister?" he whined. "I'm just a pore cowhand on my way home. Yuh've got the wrong hombre."

"On yore hoss!"

Hatfield had skillfully snaked the gun from Deven's open side holster, but he did not relax, for such men usually carried at least one hidden spare.

"Shucks, what's it all about?" Pillbottle was stalling.

The Ranger could not waste more precious time. He dealt Deven a skillful slash alongside the head and caught the sagging figure, lifted the captive across the saddle of the uneasy mustang. A few loops of Pillbottle's lariat would hold the senseless man in position until Hatfield could get away from there.

He led Deven's brown horse through dark byways, running from Sandtown, keeping off the roads as he worked toward the pine woods where he had left Buck Robertson. He paused outside of town to secure the groggy, grunting Deven. Searching him, he confiscated two revolvers from shoulder holsters and a hunting knife in a leather sheath under Pillbottle's shirt.

Buck was uneasily tossing on his blanket bed when the Ranger dumped Pillbottle Deven down on the needles covering the little knoll. He scratched a match and lit his candle stub. The tiny flame showed the rugged, grim officer. Pillbottle, ankles trussed and hands tied behind him, stared fearfully at his captor.

"Who are yuh?" he muttered. "Cuss yore hide!"

"Shut up, Deven! It wouldn't take more than a flea bite for me to drill yuh. See this boy? Yuh near killed him."

Pillbottle jumped in his bonds. "So I was right! Yuh're Double Dot I riders."

Hatfield did not bother to reply as he squatted beside Buck.

"How yuh feel?" he asked.

Buck bit his lip. His cheeks were flushed and he was restless, weak. "My head hurts, Jim. But I reckon I'm all right."

Hatfield thought fever had set in. His youthful comrade certainly needed a dry bed and careful nursing. The Ranger rose up and swung back on Pillbottle Deven. There was a hard, cold glint in the officer's eye as he towered over the bandit.

"Yuh deserve no mercy, Deven. Yuh had no idea who we were when yuh fired on us from the sawmill. As for the Double Dot I, that's where we're goin'."

"Don't take me there!" begged Pillbottle.

"I ain't goin' to. You're takin' us. All I savvy is it's on the west side of Deep River."

"I don't know where it is," said Deven instantly.

Steel fingers gripped the outlaw's shoulder and Hatfield picked him up with one hand, Deven wincing at the vise clamped to his flesh.

"Yuh'll lead us there. One slip and yuh die."

A shudder passed through Deven. He gulped, and his red-rimmed eyes fell away from the Ranger's steady look. The toughness faded from the gunslinger's soul.

"I—I ain't been there, but I guess I savvy about where she lies," he whispered hoarsely. "Anything yuh say."

"That's better. Mind yuh behave."

Hatfield set about making preparations

for the trip. He gently lifted Buck, wrapped in a warm blanket, to the gray's saddle and Buck held to the saddle-horn, head down. A knot in the blanket corners would keep him from falling off in case he lost consciousness. Next he cut Deven's ankle cords, and slung him into his leather seat. A short length of taut rawhide from boot to boot under the outlaw's mount made it impossible for Deven to throw himself off. This done, he loosened the man's wrists and retied them to the horn. Reins in hands, Pillbottle could clumsily guide his steed.

FINALLY the Ranger dropped a slip-noose around Deven's waist, took up the slack, and attached the other end to the saddle-horn of Buck's gray mustang.

"Yuh'll cut yoreself in two if yuh try to bust free, Pillbottle," he warned. "Move! I'm right behind yuh."

Cowed by the officer's might, the bandit led the way to the road and turned south. He knew how the land lay and they crossed Deep River, the gravel bed sliding under the horses' hoofs as they climbed the west bank to Double Dot I range.

A lopsided moon gave sufficient light. The Ranger watched like a hawk in case Deven should try a desperate escape, but his precautions had discouraged the captive. Pillbottle kept complaining of the ropes being tight, but made no attempt to break away.

It was late when the ranch buildings loomed before them on high ground over a tributary back from Deep River. To the north, with rolling range intervening, bulked forested slopes. No lights were on at the Double Dot I and the people there probably were asleep. But Hatfield knew there must be sentries on watch, in such a crisis as had come on the country.

Nearing the main house, he could see the four wings radiating from a central heart, long porches and the bulky stone chimneys thrusting to the pale sky. Coats of whitewash had been applied to the pine logs of which the walls were constructed and moonlight glinted on the White House. Barns, a bunkhouse, a springhouse and other smaller buildings were in back of the ranchhouse.

"Better look out," warned Pillbottle, his teeth chattering. "A thousand to one they got us pinned by rifles!"

"That's all right," drawled Hatfield. "Yuh're up front." But he was only needling the prisoner, for he sang out, "Double Dot I! We're friends, comin' through."

No one replied but hardly had he spoken when a piercing metallic clang rent the air. The Ranger believed it had come from a sledge-hammer blow on a split circle of heavy iron suspended between posts, the type of alarm small settlements or such ranches used in summoning men in case of fire or other emergency. And at mealtimes it was handy for an autocratic, impatient cook to use to call in hands, for the ringing tones would carry a surprising distance.

Hatfield stopped the procession and they sat their saddles, the echoes of the alarm fading across the range. He could hear the rattling of Deven's teeth and next a bull's-eye beam swept upon them, fixing them as it halted.

Buck Robertson sagged over his chunky gray, his eyes closed as he hung on to the saddle-horn with both hands. Pillbottle Deven looked greenish and he kept gulping, helpless in his bonds. The big Ranger sat easily, one long leg cocked at his saddle pommel.

And yet they saw none of the defenders. The lantern that had been turned on them came from a stable window. At last a peremptory voice barked:

"Set where yuh are. If this is a trick yuh'll all die for it."

"I'm a friend," repeated Hatfield. "I brought yuh a prisoner, an hombre who rides for Carr. I got a boy here they wounded in Sandtown, and he needs help. I'd like to talk with Colonel Irvine."

A side door at the house clicked open.

"I'll take over, Sea Lion!" a man's voice called. "Cover me."

There were guns on the trio from several directions as Hatfield obeyed the commands to come in slow and easy, the light following their movements.

"Yuh want Colonel Irvine, do yuh?" asked someone standing in the shadow by the house wall.

"That's right, suh. It's mighty important."

The beat of hoofs sounded around the ranch and a dark rider swept in to report.

"All clear, Boss. Nobody else near."

"All right," commanded the man by the

wall. "Light and set. I'm Jake Irvine, stranger."

Hatfield dismounted. "Colonel," he said. "I wish yuh'd put this young feller to bed pronto. He's got a scalp wound and fever's set in. This other one is Pillbottle Deven, an outlaw belongin' to a tough bunch the timber company has imported to down yuh."

Irvine was impressed by the steady, cool voice, by the tall officer's manner. A ring of armed cowboys had pressed in around the visitors. A lithe figure in a high Stetson and leather, a carbine in one hand and the lantern in the other, seemed to be the foreman, the man called "Sea Lion" by the Colonel.

STRONG hands freed Buck and lifted the slender lad down, carried him into the house to be made comfortable. A lamp was lighted inside and the tension eased. Sea Lion directed a couple of the boys who worked Pillbottle Deven off his mustang and, at Hatfield's repeated warning, led the captive off to be locked up in a corn crib behind the house.

But it was not until the Ranger showed Jake Irvine the silver star on silver circle, emblem of his great organization, that the Colonel really relaxed. He had taken Hatfield into the house and for a moment they were alone, a lamp burning on a center table.

"Yuh're from Austin, then!" said Irvine, with real relief as he shook hands. "I'm shore glad yuh've come, Ranger."

"Cap'n McDowell had yore letter, so I'm here to do what I can, suh. As a rule I like to work quiet-like for a while till I see who's who and why, but when I was headin' into Sandtown this evenin' we run into trouble."

He gave Irvine a quick account of what had occurred.

"Yuh'll have to be on double guard against this Guarantee Stack," he cautioned. "He's a loud mouth, but he's tough just the same, and so are his men."

Hatfield glanced over his shoulder as a motherly woman with a small, neat figure and dark curly hair came from a side room. The Ranger swept off his hat. Irvine said,

"This is Mr.—uh—"

"Hatfield," supplied the officer.

"Mr. Hatfield, my wife. She's seein' to yore young friend."

Mrs. Irvine smiled as she came forward and shook hands.

"He's a brave boy," she murmured. "I'm just going to get hot water and clean cloths to wash the wound. I think some hot broth will help him, too."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank yuh. His name's Buck Robertson and he's a fine feller."

From the rear appeared a lad of about twelve, who could only be the Colonel's son. "Meet Jake Junior," said the Colonel, an arm across his son's shoulders. "And here's June, my daughter."

June had followed young Jake into the main room. She was a pretty girl, thought Hatfield, as he took in the dark, curly hair piled on her head, the long-lashed violet eyes, the oval face and girlish form in a red silk gown. He saw small red slippers as she came to greet the visitor and smile on him.

"Salt of the earth, these folks," thought Hatfield.

They were a fine, handsome family, the sort which had made Texas great. He had liked Irvine at once, and could read the honest strength in the big, breezy Texan's open features. Irvine's blue eyes were intensely clear and from his manner it was plain that he was a natural leader.

Someone coming in just behind him caused the Ranger to glance around. A lithe young fellow in leather pants and a blue shirt, with a Colt in his holster and a carbine in his hand, paused in the entrance. He had reddish hair and freckles, auburn brows over hazel eyes, and a quickness of mien. He instantly began sizing up the visitor.

"Jim Hatfield, shake with Sea Lion Gaines, my ramrod," said Irvine. "Boys, all I'll say is this: I'll ride the river with either one of yuh, to the limit."

It was an unqualified recommendation for both Sea Lion and Hatfield, and Gaines's expression relaxed as he grinned and held out a hand.

"Welcome to Uneasy Hollow, stranger," he said jestingly. "That's some sample yuh fetched us."

Hatfield nodded. "Was just tellin' yore boss there's plenty more where he come from, Sea Lion. The lumbermen have hired a highbinder named Guarantee Stack who swears he'll wipe yuh out clean inside of a month."

"June!" called Mrs. Irvine from the kitchen. "Come here and help me."

Sea Lion's quick eyes touched the pretty girl for a moment and Hatfield caught the softening of the foreman's glance. June's fleeting smile, the slight toss of her head, also told a great deal.

"Step into my office and let's have a drink," invited Colonel Irvine. "We can pow-wow there."

CHAPTER VI

At the Double Dot I

HATFIELD, the Colonel, and Sea Lion smoked and drank for a time and Irvine supplied the details concerning the rising war between the cowmen and timber cutters.

"I hold the west side of Deep River, savvy?" he explained. "Eg Burley's Circle B, Hossface Tate's Slanted T, and Vern Nolan's V N fill in the east bank, and they're right behind me although they run smaller spreads and couldn't hold long against Pusey's bunch in a pinch. With this Guarantee Stack on the prod I figger I ought to call 'em all over here with their folks. What do you think?"

Hatfield nodded. "It's a good idea . . . What happened after they blasted out yore river block?"

At a nod from Irvine, Gaines took up the tale.

"They near downed me and my boys that night, but we fought our way clear, suh. When we fetched reinforcements we drove Ox Evans and his jacks off and strung two more booms. They got several rafts through but up to now we've held 'em, and we string ropes above the booms after dark every night to catch any more explosives they send along."

"And yuh figger they killed Ban Kinnicott?" inquired the officer.

"I'm shore of it," declared Irvine. "That gave 'em a toe hold in the forests. Yuh see, on account of the rough terrain they can't come in from the other side. They'd have to cut roads through canyons and rocky mountains. This is the only way out for their logs—down Deep River to Sandtown where they rough process the timber, and load it on flatcars for shipment to their mills."

Mrs. Irvine came to the door, carrying a tray laden with food—plates of steaming beef stew, home-made bread and butter, a pot of fresh coffee, preserves and doughnuts.

"*Gracias,* ma'am," said the Ranger. "This is mighty welcome."

She smiled. "I know a hungry man when I see one. And don't worry about your young friend. He's dropped off to sleep."

The warm meal was indeed most welcome, and Hatfield did it full justice.

"That Hair-oil Carr yuh saw with Stack, Hatfield, is Doc Pusey's pard," said Sea Lion. "Ain't that so, Boss?"

"Shore is," agreed Irvine. "Pusey's just as long as a snake and drags the ground when he walks. He come here and tried to bluff us out but it didn't work. I think he wanted to look me over, too."

"Yuh figger like I do that Pusey's the chief?" asked the Ranger.

"I do," said the Colonel, and Sea Lion nodded with positiveness.

"Any medicine on what's happenin' up at the camp?"

Sea Lion answered. "They're cuttin' and stackin'. They figger when they do us in they can float their rafts again. Ox Evans is in charge. They use Kinnicott's house for a depot, because it ain't far from camp."

"I reckon I'll mosey up and have a look-see at 'em," said the Ranger.

"Listen, Ox Evans is mighty tough," warned Gaines. "They don't cotton to strangers. Yuh better not go alone."

"I'll take a chance. I'll fix up as a lumberjack and tell this Ox hombre I want a job."

Both Sea Lion and Irvine were doubtful, but it was the tall man's choice and they did not argue. Right now, however, the Ranger was worn to a frazzle, and was glad to turn in.

He paused in front of the open bedroom door where Buck lay. Mrs. Irvine sat in an armchair, watching over him. The boy was sleeping quietly, a clean bandage on his tow-haired head. The woman touched a finger to her lips and nodded reassuringly.

Certain that everything was being done that could be done for Buck, Hatfield

went along with Sea Lion Gaines and turned in at the bunkhouse. . . .

When he awoke it was to a clear day, with a coolish wind off the hills. Sea Lion was outside with his cowboys. The Ranger, refreshed by his sleep, dressed quickly and stepped into the spacious yard and, in the sunlight, looked over the Double Dot I. He washed at the pump, and rolled a quirly.

The spread was a large one and efficiently run, he could tell at a glance. Cowboys were around, armed men who nodded and grinned at the visitor. The odor of coffee and fried foods widened Hatfield's nostrils and he drifted inside.

June called to him. Buck Robertson, she said, was much better, and Hatfield looked in on his young comrade before breakfast. The fever had abated and Buck was demanding food and plenty of it.

"Let me get up, Jim," he begged.

"No, Buck. Stick there like a good soldier today. If yuh're as good tomorrer, yuh can try it."

HATFIELD went to the kitchen where June had laid out breakfast for him. Sea Lion came in for another cup of coffee.

"Still aim to head for that lumber camp?" Sea Lion asked.

"Reckon so, if yuh can dig up a rig for me."

"All right. It's yore funeral, but don't say we didn't warn yuh."

Soon after, clad in corduroy pants, an old flannel shirt and plaid cap, looking as much like a lumberjack as he could, Hatfield rode away from the Double Dot I. He had two Colts hidden under his thick shirt, but to all outward appearances he was unarmed.

A view of the range would help, and he soon saw that this was good pasture, and that the wooded hills to the north controlled the rainfall. Small feeders served as watering troughs, but the main stream was unfailing so that cattle could be supported in time of drought.

The west bank belonged to the Double Dot I and, according to his information, the other was divided between the Circle B, the Slanted T and the V N, but the ranchers were friendly and cooperated with one another. Ban Kinnicott's ranch bordered on the forests, and it was this which Doc Pusey and his agents had seized as a wedge to force their way in and make the grab.

South were the blockade booms which prevented the lumbermen from floating more rafts to Sandtown for processing and shipment. Contours in the land hid this spot from Hatfield while the settlement, far off, was marked only by a smoke stain in a clear blue sky.

The Ranger had intended crossing Deep River to the east bank, but rolling dust in the southeast, toward Sandtown, caused him to change his plan of approach.

"Riders, Goldy," he murmured, "keepin' back from the river."

They might be patrolling cowboys from any of the three ranches on that side, or they could be enemy gunslingers moving up the line. In either case he had no desire to meet them at the moment. He was hunting information and not trouble.

"We'll get up above, then work through the woods," he told his mount.

The sun was molten yellow when he finally crossed the rushing torrent which was Deep River. Here it was too shallow and filled with boulders for use as a raft canal. And the lumber camp was at least a mile below.

Narrow animal trails wound through the woods, and the noisy stream echoed through the aisles. Here and there vast rock outcrops thrust upward and the brush was thick wherever light could penetrate. The Ranger could tell that the land grew rougher and impassable as it rose to the mountain heights, which made it impractical for Pusey to come in from the north. Pusey must have the Double Dot I for his business, and the smaller spreads would fall like ripe plums once he had crushed Colonel Irvine . . .

As he slowly jounced down the rough trace on the east side of Deep River, the sounds from the camp began to penetrate over the throaty roar of the rapids. Eccentric screeches rang in the woods, and he knew they were cutting trees into logs which could be rolled into the water and fastened together as rafts. It was the steam saw in operation, the machine Sea Lion Gaines had described.

Closer in, he heard the sharp blow of axes. Then he came within sight of the busy center and, dismounting, left his reins up.

"Call yuh if I need yuh, Goldy," he murmured, patting the handsome sorrel's neck.

Goldy understood. He was trained to come at a signal.

Things checked according to Gaines' information. The camp was on the east side where Deep River quieted after rushing from the heights. Rough shelters stood in the clearing, and the earth had a freshly wounded look where men had slashed away the growth. Long runways of debarked logs served to roll trimmed trees to the pool. A circular saw was being run by steam generated in a wood-heated boiler. Here was a tool shed, and a cook shack.

A new road cut from the camp led to a smallish ranchhouse of native timber, no doubt Ban Kinnicott's. Hatfield could see a couple of men in the yard down there, and cattle in log corrals off from the buildings. Strung from crosspieces on high poles were half a dozen sides of beef, skinned, fat-gleaming carcasses, enough to feed many hungry men, say a crew of lumberjacks.

Someone saw him approaching and sang out. The jacks were all armed, and grew alert at the warning. Hatfield waved and called in a friendly fashion and, stopping work, they watched him come in.

A HUGE MAN in leather trousers held up by a piece of rope shuffled to meet the visitor. He had a bulldog jaw trimmed by a black fringe of thick whiskers. The muscles bulged from his mighty limbs and he carried a horse pistol and long knife. Smoldering eyes hastily sized up the Ranger.

"What yuh doin' up here?" he snarled.

"I'm lookin' for work, suh. I'm an expert trimmer. They told me in Sandtown I could mebbe find a job with you. Is yore handle Evans?"

"That's me—Ox Evans." The Ox blinked. Hatfield's respectful tone threw him off the track for a moment. He shoved out his upper lip with his tongue and lines deepened in his red brow. "Say, how did yuh get up above us?"

Hatfield had an answer ready. "I was seen and chased by a couple of cowboys. They fired at me. I managed to make the woods, then I got lost, but I heard the saw goin' after a while."

Ox Evans kept studying him. He was plainly suspicious of the applicant. Such a man as Ox would be familiar with the aspect of a lumberjack, which Hatfield claimed to be. A small error in makeup or just the way he looked might be enough to convince the Ox that here was a spy.

Ox finally made up his mind, but it was as yet impossible to guess what his conclusion was.

"Step over and help yoreself to a plate of grub," he invited.

He gave a signal which started the trimmers to work near the bank. They were making ready logs to float down, against the moment when Irvine and the other cowmen were out of the picture.

The Ranger had a feeling that all was not well, that his ruse was not succeeding. Yet he was daring, and followed the Ox toward the office and cook shack, each step making retreat more difficult, should it become necessary.

The jacks feeding the insatiable steam saw had paused, but now resumed their task. Axes could be heard not far from camp as pines were felled. A large blackened iron pot hung simmering over a wood fire a few paces from the shack. The cook was busy mixing biscuit dough in a big pan, sitting on a length of log upended as a stool.

The Ox grunted as he stooped to pick up a tin plate and spoon from the pile the cook had rinsed out after breakfast.

"Dig in," he growled. "Free chow today."

Hatfield squatted down to help himself. From the corner of one eye he noted that the trimmers had again quit work and were slowly edging to the center of camp. That uneasy sensation, some instinctive warning born of long experiences and innate caution, heightened. But the tall man showed no sign.

Ox Evans poured a mug of coffee, threw sugar into it and held it out to him. When the Ranger accepted the steaming metal cup his hands were full and he guessed that this might be the boss lumberjack's object. The Ox was not the sort to wait

on anybody just out of ordinary hospitality. He was tough, rough, and bad-tempered.

"Now, yuh two-bit eyeballer," he snarled, "who sent yuh up here to spy on me?"

His hairy paw dropped to the heavy pistol stuck in the rope belt. He stood several paces from Hatfield and, seeing no weapon on the visitor, thought he had plenty of time. The Ox was relishing his own cunning at having drawn in his victim. His lips were turned up in a smirk of self-congratulation and he could hardly wait for the laugh his men would give as they gloated over the captive.

Evans' play was enough to start the other jacks for their pistols, which all carried. The cook jumped up, brandishing the sharp knife with which he had been working.

The last vestige of doubt had fled from Hatfield's mind. The Ox had not been fooled. Something about the caller's make-up, his manner of speech, or perhaps simply the Ox's habit of trusting nobody who was not vouched for, had brought this quickly to a head.

An eyeballer is one who pokes himself into another's affairs and that exactly fitted what the tall officer was doing. He could not prove Evans wrong, for the Ox's blunt diagnosis was correct.

But if the Ox was right as to that, he had made other errors. He had no way to gauge the unusual speed of Hatfield's reactions, and the fact the visitor wore no gun in sight made him believe he had an easy mark.

CHAPTER VII

Close Shave

EVANS HAD not finished speaking when Hatfield lashed out, rising up fast and hurling the mug of hot coffee into the Ox's bearded face. Evans wore only a dirty, thin undershirt on his beefy torso and the liquid stung, made him jump and bellow in rage. The plate of stew caught the cook and stopped him in his tracks, and the lightning draw of a Ranger Colt from the shoulder holster inside his flannel shirt beat them all to the punch.

The Ox staggered back, blinded for moments by the coffee, his hand flying from his revolver grip. Hatfield threw two slugs in the direction of the armed jacks coming from the river, and sprang around the corner of the nearest shack, hitting the frightened cook a lick with his Colt barrel as he passed.

Wild shots answered the Ranger, and one bit a chunk from a pine log end at the turn but he was out of their sight for the time being and made the most of it by sprinting for the trees around the clearing. He turned and rapped two more at them, and then he was in the woods.

"Stop him—shoot him down!" roared Ox Evans.

The lumber boss picked up a rifle leaning against the cabin wall and knelt to try a long shot at the fleeing man.

Hatfield heard the whine of the heavy bullet. The boots he had borrowed did not fit well and prevented him from mak his best speed. He tripped over a root and fell heavily, breaking his fall with his outstretched hand. Ox Evans thought he had made a hit and roared with triumph, but the Ranger scrambled up and limped on.

A pair of lumberjacks who had been sawing at a tall pine had quit work and hurried after him in obedience to the Ox's warnings. And there were more not far off in the forest, armed not only with axes but with firearms.

His only idea was to escape, so once he had cover from the enemy guns he whistled shrilly for Goldy. The sorrel came trotting to him. In the saddle he turned and made off into the woods away from the river clearing.

"Sea Lion was right," he muttered, breath coming fast as he ejected the empty shells from the cylinder and reloaded his Colt. "They're on the prod. Anyhow, I've seen the Ox and some of the boys, and that camp."

Ox Evans' men had horses and some of them saddled up and started after him, but soon he was out of sight as the forest grew denser. Half a mile east of Deep River he hunted a path back to the open range.

When he emerged from the woods he

was on a blufflike height from which he could see Kinnicott's place, perhaps a mile away. Below him the river range rolled on and on in a grand sweep. He had to dismount and check Goldy on the steep trail to the lower levels.

He rode south on the east bank of Deep River, which was wide and strong enough to float log rafts. The Slanted T, the V N, and the Circle B ran their cattle here, keeping the land cleared of brush.

Some rising dust warned him and he slowed, watching the next rise. He passed some rock outcroppings and saw a bunch of steers coming toward him. They were being driven by a half a dozen men in leather and big hats. From a distance they had the look of being cowboys, but the Ranger was not certain of their identity.

Farther off, on his left as he watched, he saw more riders running over another collection of cows to join to the first. He was wary. They might be the legal owners of the animals and the range and again, they might not.

He had lost time as he waited to make sure who the horsemen were. A couple sighted him and waved in friendly fashion.

"Shucks, if they were local cowboys they'd want to gun me," he decided. He had on a lumberjack rig and Ox Evans' boys were certainly not popular in these parts.

He began riding off at a sharp angle so as to circle well around the cows. The drivers believed he was getting out of their way. Several more waved to him.

Then he recognized Guarantee Stack. The boss outlaw was supervising the proceedings, keeping out of the dust, mooching along and taking it easy for himself. Stack, too, gave the supposed lumberjack a greeting, arm raised high as he semaphored hello.

Behind him Hatfield heard the crack of a light carbine. Glancing back he saw three men from the lumber camp flogging after him. They were whooping it up, firing pistols and rifles as they tried to attract Stack's attention and get the rustlers to head off the man on the golden sorrel.

GUARANTEE STACK became alert and pulled up to stare at the gesturing, excited pursuers. The rustler chief pushed back his Stetson to scratch his head, puzzled at the drama unfolding before him. Then Stack pointed at the lone man and the jacks renewed their pantomime to show him he had guessed right. Guarantee Gus spoke to a couple of rustlers and the three of them broke away from the cattle drive and galloped at Hatfield.

The fact that the Ranger would not close with them but only picked up speed told Stack he had it figured right, that the single jack was wanted by the others. Guarantee opened fire, hoping for a lucky strike, or to scare the fugitive into surrender.

Hatfield held his metal and settled for a ride. Stack and his outlaws were first-class horsemen, however. They chased him for two miles, shoving him away from the river. The sorrel ran masterfully, rounding a patch of woods left as a wind-and-snow-break. And as Hatfield cleared this he sighted more cattle and men. There was a scrap going on between five in one group and two in another. Near the larger group were forty or fifty steers.

"Hey, Woody! Knock that cuss off the sorrel!" Guarantee Stack's roaring voice reached the five, who must be more rustlers in Stack's organization. That would make the other two local cowboys, no doubt from one of the ranches along Deep River.

"Woody" and his men tried for the Ranger who pelted east. This brought him fairly close to the outnumbered cowboys who, seeing a lumberjack within gunshot, let fly at him with what they could spare.

"The sooner we get rid of this rig, the better, Goldy," muttered the harassed officer.

The two buckaroos were furiously angry at being unable to check the rustlers. The arrival of Guarantee Stack and his reinforcements settled it and they whirled their mustangs and spurred south, flogging away full-tilt to save their necks and report what was going on.

By the time Hatfield shook off the persistent Guarantee and his gunhands the day was well along. And it was suppertime when he rode wearily into the Double Dot I yard and dropped off the sorrel. Both man and horse were plastered

with dried mud, sweated dust and a collection of every type of burr and sticker in the region.

Sea Lion Gaines hurried to greet him.

"Whew! Yuh look like yuh'd ridden to tarnation blazes and back!"

"I feel like it. How's Buck?"

"We've had to fight him to keep him lyin' down."

"*Bueno.*" That was a relief . . .

In the evening, refreshed by a bath and shave, clean clothing and a hearty meal, Jim Hatfield sat on the edge of Colonel Irvine's office desk, facing the ranchers of Deep River. Irvine had sent for his friends.

Horseface Tate of the Slanted T was tall and spare, with a long face and grim blue eyes. Eg Burley was stockier, a steady man with a dark mustache and brown eyes set wide apart. Vern Nolan was the youngest, hardly thirty, wholesome, quick with his smile. All were married, with wives and children to care for and protect.

They were fine Texans, the type who deserved what help the State could offer. As a rule they could ably protect themselves and with interest, but in this case Hatfield knew they were against brutal odds. Doc Pusey would ruthlessly crush them.

The four ranchers, Sea Lion Gaines, and the Ranger were closeted in the office for a council of war. Tobacco smoke slowly curled to the low ceiling, and drinks had been set out.

"Boys, yuh can fry the flapjacks and pass 'em all to this hombre," said Jake Irvine.

The Ranger stood up. "I'll start by identifyin' myself. I'm Jim Hatfield, from Austin."

He held up a long hand and, cupped in it, was the silver star on silver circle. They knew the emblem and were comforted by it and what it stood for, by the powerful officer who had come to advise them and fight for them.

"I usually take a look-see before tellin' who I am," he went on. "But I've seen plenty around here, though I ain't been on yore range for long. I'd appreciate it if yuh don't call me Ranger in public, as I want to keep the enemy in the dark for a while. . . I met up with Hair-oil Carr in Sandtown, and have been face to face with Ox Evans, which yuh couldn't call a pleasure. Guarantee Gus Stack, a brass-lunged cattle thief, has also tossed his runnin' iron in the ring. He has thirty riders and can fetch more. Mebbe the Colonel has told yuh I captured one of Stack's gunslingers.

"Judgin' by what I bumped into today, Guarantee Stack is cleanin' the land of cows. The beef will feed the lumberjacks and rustlers, and the surplus can be sold. Before yuh savvy it yuh'll have lost yore main herds. We got to strike pronto, just to check the thieves. I've figgered it out. We band together and make a flyin' attack on that lumber camp, run Ox Evans and his jacks into the woods. Next we charge Sandtown and take it over. That will hold up Pusey for a while till we can catch our second wind."

"That's the way to talk, Ranger'," cried Colonel Irvine. "I'm with yuh."

SEA LION GAINES looked pleased at thought of real action, and the others were nodding, althought Tate, Burley and Nolan seemed troubled. Eg Burley finally voiced the smaller ranchers' objection.

"S'pose while we're all fannin' the lumber camp and the settlement, Guarantee Stack's toughs hit our homes? We got to watch out for our women and kids."

Hatfield nodded. "I've thought of that. Yuh must all three fetch yore families here till this is settled. We'll make it a fort, and leave a guard on duty while we're out."

"But they'll burn down our houses and barns," growled Horseface Tate.

"It's possible, but I figger they won't destroy what they hope to take over when they've cooked yore hash. And if yuh don't move at once they'll knock yuh off one by one."

"I'm with yuh, Ranger," agreed Vern Nolan. "It's the only way, boys."

Tate and Burley saw it, too, then. Battle plans were hurriedly projected. The ranchers would escort their families to the Double Dot I where there was plenty of room and food, to hold out until the war was decided. . . .

The first touch of grayish light touched the mountains as Jim Hatfield and Sea Lion Gaines crept on foot toward the lumber camp. Behind them came the

ranchers and their cowboys commanded by Colonel Jake Irvine. So skillfully had Hatfield handled the approach under cover of darkness that no alarm had reached Ox Evans. Sea Lion Gaines knew every inch of the territory, for he had hunted cattle through it for years. Using back trails they had crossed Deep River north of the camp and left their horses, stealing through the pine forests to the clearing.

The cook was stirring around, building his breakfast fire at the open hearth. A burly lumberjack with a double-barreled shotgun was slumped on an upended log, supposedly on guard. Big stacks of logs, sawed to raft length for floating downstream, were on the bank. The Ox and his cutters had been busy.

Crouched at one side of a thick pine tree, Hatfield checked up. He touched Sea Lion Gaines and nodded. Gaines crawled back to signal Irvine, and after a few minutes Sea Lion returned and raised his hand to show that all was ready.

The Ranger, Colt in hand, jumped to his feet and a shrill Rebel yell came from Sea Lion's throat, echoed by the charging cowboys who drove in from three directions, the river forming the diameter of the half circle. The sentry with the shotgun took one horrified look, tipped over on his unsteady seat and squeezed a trigger, the charge flying into the air.

Colts and carbines rattled in the cool dawn and alarmed lumberjacks ran from shacks and tents, among them the massive Ox Evans.

CHAPTER VIII

Counter

OX EVANS sought to rally his men, but it was useless. Some had guns and hastily fired at the attackers, but they were taking to the water, wading and swimming to the west bank to escape. Others managed to dash past the enveloping wings before they closed in, and Ox Evans was one of these. The boss lumberjack moved with surprising speed as they headed for the horses they held in a brush pen.

The thick woods offered haven to the panicked jacks.

"Let 'em go," counseled the Ranger. "Most are armed, and yuh'd lose too many of the boys capturin' the cusses among the trees. Besides, we can't spare the time to hunt 'em down."

Grabbing axes from the tool shed they smashed the steam boiler. Mounted cowboys lassoed the table saw and dragged it to the bank, heaving it into the pool.

Then they rode to Ban Kinnicott's former home. It was deserted. The few enemy guards who had been there had been warned by the hubbub at the camp and had ridden away.

Kinnicott's corrals had been enlarged and they were crowded with steers—Double Dot I, Slanted T, V N and Circle B brands in evidence. Stack's rustlers had brought them up.

The bars were pulled down and the cows freed so they could return to the lower range.

As Hatfield had figured, Guarantee Stack had split up his crew into small groups as they busily cleaned off the cattle, the life-blood of the ranches. Behind the Ranger, Irvine and his friends started a swift drive for Sandtown, straight down Deep River.

"Let's hope we can beat Evans' messengers to it," said the Ranger.

It was close to noon when they sighted the little settlement. They were moving south on the east side of the stream. Hatfield pointed to the wooden bridge across the river.

"That must be one of the Ox's men," he said.

A rider on a lathered black mustang was quirting over the bridge. The breeze brought the hollow drumming of the shod hoofs on the loose planks, as well as gritty particles which stung their eyes and flesh.

Daylight exposed crass and dreary details about Sandtown which the darkness had concealed. Hatfield moved in with the men he was aiding, alert for trouble. The so-called streets were sandy lanes and the plaza as well was covered with yellowish loose soil which the sportive winds picked up and flung at passersby.

The Wolf Saloon, the stores, the saw-

mill to the south, a small townhall and jail stood out but, except for the Wolf which had been freshly painted, all were weather-beaten. Women in sunbonnets were on the sandy streets where children were playing. Chickens, pigs, dogs and goats made free with the plaza. The railroad track came in from the southeast to the station which was a shack open at one side, and cattle pens were beyond it.

The men from the range were only a hundred yards below the sawmill, where the huge water wheel slowly creaked as it turned, when Colonel Irvine yelled:

"There's Doc Pusey!"

The messenger had reached Sandtown. A couple of pistol shots and sharp yells rang out, and women, children and bystanders disappeared as by magic. Hatfield craned eagerly forward for a look at Pusey. He saw the tall, bony figure who had run out of the Wolf, with Hair-oil Thad Carr at his heels.

Pusey was wearing black pants, a white silk shirt, and a bow tie. He was hatless and the Ranger noticed his receding hairline. Hatfield had an impression of a vulturelike, yellow-skinned countenance, darkened by bluish stubble.

But there was little time for observation. Cassius Pusey threw the heavy rifle he carried to his shoulder, opening fire on the approaching ranchers. The murderous slugs sang ominously close. And, at the alarm, men in the sawmill shot at the riders in the road.

Hair-oil Thad Carr also was armed, and Doc Pusey had a dozen more fighters on hand. They surged into the scrap for Sandtown. Pusey quickly took shelter behind a thick post as he heard metal whistling about his ears, and his men picked their spots.

"Split up and circle!" ordered the Ranger. "Watch out for the sawmill!"

It was close to this point that Buck Robertson had been shot down in the night.

HATFIELD HAD a score of good men with him. The ranchers had pooled their cowboys but had not dared leave the Double Dot I without a strong guard. Women and children, and portable valuables were in Irvine's ranchhouse, the center of resistance to Doc Pusey.

"If we can get around to their rear we'll have 'em pinned against the river," the Ranger told Colonel Irvine.

They had left the road and were working behind the east line of the buildings on Plaza Boulevard. Dismounting, small groups of armed cowmen began filtering through the gaps to catch Pusey and his gunhands.

Hatfield was first to emerge from one side of the Wolf, Colt in hand. A bullet slashed the wooden wall a yard from him.

The firing came from the north end of town, for Doc Pusey had shrewdly realized his peril, had hastily mounted, and was pulling out. Plenty of saddled horses had been waiting at the racks, fresh mustangs ready to run.

Pusey, Carr and about fifteen others were slowly retreating, shooting as they went.

"Shucks, I'd liked to have taken that Pusey hound," thought the Ranger.

Colonel Irvine, Sea Lion Gaines, Horseface Tate, Nolan, Burley and their cowboys hurried to join him. Blasts of gunfire roared over Sandtown as the triumphant attackers seized the settlement.

"Let's go after the cusses!" barked Sea Lion.

It took a few minutes to bring up the horses, tired from the swift march on Sandtown, but soon the chase was on.

Beyond the settlement clearing dense pine forests closed in on the winding dirt river road. Hatfield, leading the chase on his golden sorrel, saw Doc Pusey, Hair-oil Carr and their men taking to the tall timber.

Sea Lion Gaines surged ahead, whooping it up. Colonel Irvine's foreman was enthusiastic over the victory.

"Take it easy, Sea Lion," cautioned the Ranger.

Sea Lion's Stetson flapped in the breeze, pulling against the taut chin-strap as a rifle bullet ventilated the crown. Pusey was in the woods now, from which ambush he could mow them down.

Colonel Irvine, an experienced field officer, realized the danger. They could be wiped out without even getting a crack at the enemy!

"We better pull out, Ranger!" called Irvine.

Hatfield was already signaling the

ranchers off. They turned back to the town, glad enough for surcease for a time. All of them had been riding and fighting for fifteen hours with hardly a breather, and both men and animals were exhausted. The Ranger led them to the plaza where they sought shade and cool drinks.

Sea Lion Gaines raised his elbows, his hands tucked under his armpits, and crowed like a rooster.

"We done it! Town's ours!" He grinned at Hatfield.

The others felt triumphant, too. Hatfield let them enjoy themselves. At least they had gained a respite in the war Pusey had started against the range. Yet Doc Pusey was on the prod, Guarantee Gus Stack, Ox Evans and most of their crews were loose and must be dealt with. All the cowmen could not be in several places at once, for they did not have sufficient forces for that. Sandtown, the lumber camp, and especially the Double Dot I were key points. If Irvine split up his followers, then nothing could be held. Plainly they must stick together . . . .

The setting sun was reflected in a wide, ruby slash across Deep River when the Ranger emerged from the Wolf, a quirly drooping from his lips. Cowboy sentries were riding herd on Sandtown, watching for signs of the enemy. The afternoon hours had been devoted to rest and sleep, various cowboys taking turns at guard duty. But nothing had been seen or heard of Doc Pusey since they had chased the lumber baron into the woods.

The evening breeze picked up grit and flung it into Hatfield's face. Otherwise, peace lay upon Sandtown which had quickly quieted down after the brief battle.

The local law consisted of an aged marshal who was friendly not only with Jake Irvine and his rancher colleagues but with everybody. His job was to maintain order in the settlement and hope for the best, so the Ranger was not conning to him to any great extent.

COLONEL IRVINE appeared, with Sea Lion Gaines at his side.

"What now, Ranger?" asked Irvine. "I'm gettin' worried about the folks at the ranch. S'pose Pusey collects all his cussed hands and strikes there?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Yuh've hit the nail on the head, Colonel. But if we want to hold Sandtown, we got to keep our main force here day and night. Is it worth it?"

Horseface Tate, Burley and Vern Nolan tagged over. Cowboys from the four outfits collected in little groups, smoking and talking in low voices as night fell. Oil lamps and lanterns were being lighted, and townsmen were holding forth in the Wolf and other drinking spots.

But peace was no longer to hold sway in the town. Hardly had dark dropped its velvet blanket over the world than a carbine shot cracked and Rebel yells sounded north of the clearing. Hatfield swung the golden gelding and hurried in that direction, followed by the other range men. A couple of mounted Double Dot I boys were beating it to town, shooting and whooping as they came.

"Here they come, faggin' along in big wagons!"

Long vehicles which were used to carry logs or lumber rumbled into view, drawn by running horses under the lash. Thick planks had been nailed around the sides to shield concealed gunners. A dozen of them were filled with Guarantee Stack's outlaws and Pusey's lumberjacks.

They surged into Sandtown, blasts of rifle fire meeting the cowmen. As the enemy reached the edge of the plaza shotguns and Colts joined in. Metal, smoke, and rolling dust mingled in the air.

The cowmen bravely met the attack. A horse of one team was hit and collapsed, and the long wagon slewed around, finally stopping. It made a small fort from which marksmen lying in the wagon body could shoot. Several more wagons tore into the plaza, and the impact of Pusey's attack smashed back the defenders.

"What yuh think?" asked Irvine anxiously.

Two of his men had been cut by flying lead and more would certainly catch it as Pusey took over.

"We're out," answered the Ranger.

They might dismount and take to the buildings, but he knew they would be outnumbered, that Pusey's bunch could concentrate on one small group at a time. He did not want to sacrifice the decent men he had come to help in order to gun outlaws. Pusey would not care if he lost

gunhands in such a struggle. He could always hire more.

The defenders beat a hasty retreat before Pusey's might. Howls and lead came after them. Crossing the railroad track they came to a side lane leading to the wooden bridge over Deep River. This was the shortest route to the west bank on which the Double Dot I was situated.

"Let's cross!" sang out Irvine.

"Wait a jiffy," warned the Ranger.

They could make out the bulge of the triangular supports on either side of the bridge. The way seemed open, but Hatfield sensed a trap.

"Stick to the road, Colonel," he advised.

They passed the turnoff and guns roared at them from the river. Pusey had sent sharpshooters to lie hidden under the bank and nail them at the bridge. The sawmill was deserted. Two cowboys who had been on guard there had just come flogging up to meet them.

South of Sandtown they swam the stream and, shaking off water as they made the far bank, moved inland, then north for the ranch. On home range the weary raiders pushed back to Irvine's ranch. Sentries challenged them. The Double Dot I was safe. There had been no attack. Nor was there one during the night when the fighters slept. . . .

In the bright new day the Ranger washed up at the yard pump and fixed a smoke, thinking about breakfast. Buck Robertson came bounding from the back door to greet him. He was recovered from the injury, bubbling with energy.

"Jim! How are yuh? Sorry I had to miss that fight."

Hatfield was deeply relieved to find his comrade in such fine fettle. Young Jake, the Colonel's son, came tagging after Buck with the devoted interest a younger boy shows an older one.

"Say, Buck, let's play cards. . . . Let's shoot tin cans. . . . Buck, I savvy where there's a rattlesnake den!"

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CHAPTER IX

A Job for Buck

JIM HATFIELD took the two boys in tow. Sea Lion Gaines was in a corral and waved to them. Pillbottle Deven was safe and sound in the corn crib and, finding he was not being mistreated, he had adopted a surly, tough attitude, refusing to give any information on his outlaw comrades. June and her mother, assisted by wives and daughters of the guests, were fixing breakfast in the roomy kitchen while mounted waddies circled on guard. Jim Hatfield spent a pleasant interval with the two boys, for the time being forgetting outlawry and the danger that threatened the pleasant ranch. The sun was gilding the range when, after a hearty meal, the leaders met for consultation.

"What next?" asked Horseface Tate.

They looked to Hatfield for guidance.

"Well, we've won a little breather," he replied. "The trouble is that time's on Doc Pusey's side. He can whittle yuh down."

"We're losin' cows." Eg Burley nodded. "Guarantee Stack has free run while we lie up here."

Ways and means were discussed at length.

"I need to watch Pusey," declared the Ranger. "Sooner or later it will simmer down to a finish fight, and we shore need to be in the right position."

Pusey's field headquarters now were in Sandtown. It was vital that a close check be kept on him. Hatfield could think of only one way by which that could be done —Buck Robertson. Buck was ready and eager for duty when Hatfield spoke with him about it.

"Buck, you fix up like a town boy," he said. "Yuh can sneak into Sandtown after dark and hang around. Watch Doc Pusey and Carr."

He supplied details and told Buck of the balcony post where he himself had overheard the men talking in Carr's hotel room.

It was a dangerous assignment, but Buck was capable, and enjoyed such

work. Town clothing was found to fit Buck, and that afternoon he started on his gray mustang for the settlement. He had a rendezvous with Hatfield for the following night. As soon as Buck was gone Hatfield started off on a patrol.

The Ranger found Kinnicott's deserted, the lumber camp just as he and the ranchers had left it after running off Ox Evans and his crew. Coming downriver he saw no signs of rustlers and the log booms, guarded by alert cowboys, had not been disturbed.

Next night, after dark, he waited for Buck Robertson in the woods south of Sandtown. He was glad to see the young fellow as Buck came along, and led his chunky gray mustang into the pine grove after Hatfield's low hail.

Buck was in fine fettle. His was a daring nature, and Hatfield had no desire to shake his confidence in himself. That blind attack by Pillbottle Deven had not been a personal affair, and in undertaking his important mission Buck had run no more than the usual risks.

Buck was excited.

"Jim," he said at once, "I got a job sweepin' out the Wolf mornin's and waitin' on table dinner and supper. I'm off duty at nine o'clock, savvy, and I sleep in the barn back of the saloon. Last night I got up on the balcony like yuh said and heard this Pusey sidewinder and Thad Carr plannin' things with that big rustler, Guarantee Gus Stack. They aim to blast the Double Dot I right off the map. They got dynamite they use in bustin' log jams."

Pusey would go the limit, thought the Ranger. There were women and children at Irvine's, but this would not deter the Doc.

"Is Doc in town now?" he asked.

"He was when I left a while ago. He's stayin' with Carr."

"*Bueno.* We'll go in."

The balcony post the Ranger had discovered came in handy again. The noise from the Wolf covered any slight sounds made in reaching the shadowed spot and the window beyond was open to the warmish night.

Doc Pusey, Hair-oil Carr and Ox Evans were drinking as they conferred in the lamplit hotel room. Music and voices came from below. Hatfield, crouched low and peering under the raised sash, could see the hook-nosed, wide-jawed Pusey slouched in a chair, whittling away at a chunk of wood.

HIS sharp knife had a delicate, shining blade, like a surgeon's scalpel. Tonight Pusey was wearing dark pants, a white shirt, and a yellow stock. His lipless mouth was set in a straight line as his intensely black eyes studied the results of his work.

"What do you think about Guarantee Gus, Chief?" inquired Carr curiously.

"He'll do for the job, I believe," replied Pusey, without glancing up.

Ox Evans rumbled curses. "Big windbag! He's a hog, Boss."

"Sure he's a hog." Pusey shrugged. "I don't doubt he'll make trouble when it comes to a split and payoff. However, once we've finished here there will be ways and means of riddin' ourselves of the cuss if he proves nasty."

Pusey was not satisfied with the knife. He put down the figure he was carving and extracted a small stone in a leather case from his pocket. Honing the scalpel on this, he tested the edge with his thumb, then resumed his whittling.

Carr thought over what Pusey had said. He seemed nervous over Gus Stack.

"He's pretty tough," he commented uneasily. "I'd hate to have him think we aimed to cross him."

"I'll tear him to pieces," threatened the Ox, his huge hands clenching.

"Just act natural," advised Pusey calmly. "I've overcome much smarter opponents than Guarantee Gus. You know that. His gunhands can do the strong-arm work for me. That will save our own boys."

"Stack has lots of outlaw connections," observed Carr.

"I don't doubt it." Doc Pusey nodded. "We'll need fifty to sixty hard riders to wipe up this range. Once we blast Irvine and his pards out of their fort it will be up to Stack. He's promised to fetch in enough men inside of four days. As to that, I can afford to wait better than Irvine can. The ranchers are losin' cows and money and they couldn't hold out long at this rate. Still, I'd rather get it settled. I can't be bothered with small fry like them."

Hair-oil Thad Carr carefully caressed his waxed mustache.

"I don't cotton to rough stuff, Doc," he objected. "Always the chance the law may catch up. S'pose Austin sends in the Rangers?"

"Don't let that worry you," Pusey said calmly. "The law is on my side. I've taken care of the Austin end. These stupid cowmen can't compete with me. I'll be lumber king of this country, and that's just a starter. Why, inside of six months I'll control all the forests east of the central plateau!" Pusey was very sure of himself. "I'll hook the mornin' train to Fort Worth, boys. I'll pick up warrants from the judge for Irvine and his pards, and John Doe papers for anybody else we wish to be rid of. I'll outlaw Irvine, and if they resist that's their hard luck."

"Think I'll run over to the city with you," said Carr. "These one-horse burgs give me the creeps. The Ox can hold things till we get back. Nothin' much will strike till Stack's recruits pull in."

"Suit yourself." Pusey yawned and put down his figurine. "Ox, while we're away you get plenty of fused grenades ready for the time we hit the ranch."

"Yes, suh." Ox Evans rose, shaking himself. "See yuh."

He started for the door, probably heading for his room on the other side of the hotel.

Hatfield drew off, and retired with Buck behind the stables serving the Wolf and other buildings on that side of Plaza Street.

"I'm interested in Doc Pusey, Buck," he whispered, "and I got to check on the sidewinder. His main den's in Fort Worth, so I'll mosey over and see what holds."

Pusey's boasts of political influence were needling him.

"Want me to go along, Jim?" asked Buck.

"No. Stick here and watch Ox Evans. If anything goes sour, notify Colonel Irvine pronto."

"When yuh startin'?"

"Now. I can beat the mornin' train over. Now listen. When I get back I'll want to see yuh. I'll sneak to this spot —it's a good place. If yuh hear a owl hoot twice, with three counts between the hoots, come here soon as yuh can."

He picked up the sorrel and snaked out of Sandtown, avoiding beaten paths until well away from town. The moonlit dirt road wound over hill and dale, through woods, and eventually would take him to the Fort Worth pike. That stock-trading metropolis lay north of the Deep River range.

"I'll wire Cap'n McDowell," he thought. "He can see about Pusey's Austin connections."

Chinstrap taut, the powerful Ranger's face was set in determined lines, touched by the pale, cold light as he rode on, on to Fort Worth. . . .

THE sun of late afternoon slanted in over bustling Fort Worth, across the wide avenue to gild a long sign over the front roof of the roomy structure in which Ranger Hatfield was so interested.

On the far side of the street the Ranger slouched against the wall of a saloon on a corner, observing the place. The sign over the door said:

PUSEY LUMBER COMPANY
CASSIUS PUSEY, PROP.

Smaller black print announced:

CABINET WORK OUR SPECIALTY

Behind the office were sheds protecting many thousands of feet of seasoned lumber. Yellow pine was the standby, but there were cabinet woods such as maple, walnut, beech, ash, elm and poplar. Live-oak was used for ship timbers, hickory in constructing wagons tough enough to withstand the tasks demanded by pioneers. Coaches on regular runs called for handsome, inlaid woods.

The Ranger was aware that an insatiable new market had sprung up as the railroads expanded throughout the vast land. Passenger and freight carriers could not be turned out fast enough, while the popular palace cars required a tremendous footage of fancy hardwoods for paneling and trim.

It was plain to be seen that Cassius Pusey was a big operator. His factory could supply anything in the lumber line.

Hatfield had reached Fort Worth before noon. Both the golden sorrel and Hatfield had needed rest and food. He had groomed Goldy and left him in a

livery stable corral, then wired Captain McDowell.

Doc Pusey and Hair-oil Carr had arrived about an hour ago, and Pusey had headed straight for his offices. Pusey's shops occupied the entire block and through large windows could be seen craftsmen processing and carving, hard at work.

The city stood on the Chisholm Trail up which Texas stock raisers drove their cattle herds to northern markets. It was beautifully situated on a level space overlooking the west fork of the Trinity River.

The inhabitants had a fierce pride in their community which was growing by leaps and bounds as a railway center, and making a bid for manufacturing plants, as well as being the main packing center of north Texas. Smoke rose from tall stacks, drays and carriages moved in the streets. Business was booming.

A cigarette burned in the Ranger's lips. From the open window of the nearby saloon came the familiar odor of the damp bar, of beer and cooking. He watched Pusey's place, waiting for a break.

After a while the whistles blew, ending the day's labor. As workers hurried homeward, the avenues were filled with traffic. Men bustled to and fro, each intent on his own affairs, thoughtless of others. Saloons filled up as the thirsty stopped for drinks.

The sun dipped behind the far western horizon. Lights sprang up through the city and Hatfield became alert as Doc Pusey and Thad Carr emerged from the main office and climbed into a waiting carriage. A Negro coachman was on the front seat.

Hatfield walked along, almost paralelling the carriage which was moving at a slow pace in the traffic. Two blocks up it stopped to let Carr out in front of a hotel, and Pusey went on, but not far.

The vehicle turned into the driveway of a large, square mansion set in landscaped grounds on the north side of Fort Worth —the lumber baron's home. Iron deer and other statues loomed in the spacious yard, and there were servants everywhere. A woman greeted Pusey as he entered.

It looked as though Pusey were set for a while. The Ranger wanted to get into Puseys office and take a look at the records. They might prove of value in his attempt to pin the lumber king. He strolled back to the factory, but there was a light inside and he saw a cleaner at work.

He was hungry and the saloon across the street had a free lunch counter. He entered the place, bought a drink, and helped himself to the roast beef, ham, cheeses and other delicacies. By the time he had finished his meal the cleaner at the Pusey factory had completed his tasks. The Ranger watched him blow out the lamp, then come out and walk up the street.

CHAPTER X

Lumber King

RANGER Hatfield crossed the street and looked things over. Passersby on the sidewalks and in the road would make it difficult to force an entry to the Pusey factory up front, and wooden gates blocked the two entrances to the interior yards.

He went on around the board fence which circled Pusey's establishment. There did not seem to be any watchman. In the shadows on the back lane he seized the fence top, pulled himself up and slid over.

He was in the stacks. On both sides were open-fronted sheds under which lumber of various sizes lay ready for sale. The odor of sawdust and resinous woods perfumed the air. The rear doors leading into the shops were bolted from inside, but he located a window which he could raise. He climbed in and stood in the gloom, trying to get his eyes focused in the dimness.

Lathes and other wood-turning machines loomed shadowy in the roomy shops. There were long benches with sets of carpenter tools hanging in neat array over them. The windows looked out on the main avenue. He crossed the creaking wooden floor and found a door leading into a hallway. Another entry led into the offices.

Here was an anteroom with benches and chairs for the use of customers waiting to

see Pusey. The inner office was well-furnished with a rug, a large desk, easy chairs, a closet, and at the rear wall, two large files.

Hatfield had come prepared with a bull's-eye lantern which he now lit, keeping the slide over the face. There were no curtains to shut off the street windows, so he had to be careful. There was room in the clothes and storage closet, however, and he felt out some of Pusey's papers, transferred them to the cubicle and, shutting the door, could there safely examine them under his light.

It took more time than he had expected, as many of the communications were routine letters, orders, replies, queries. But after two hours of patient slogging the Ranger had a fair picture of Doc Pusey's business.

It was staggering. Pusey was expanding and had signed agreements to deliver millions on millions of feet of cabinet woods and finished lumber to shipyards in Houston, Galveston and Corpus Christi. He was on the inside track with the railway palace car manufacturers and supplying contractors who built mansions, coaches, and carriages for the wealthy.

Plans had been drawn up to open several Pusey branches in other cities, among them Austin. That he actually did have political connections was also plain.

"Why, he's a hog," thought Hatfield. "No wonder he's after those forests. He'll bust out like a rash all over the State if we can't snub him soon."

Letters and survey reports pointed to more areas where Pusey could seize the raw materials he must obtain to satisfy his contracts and fulfill his limitless ambition. Deep River range was but one step in Pusey's ruthless march to make himself the lumber king of Texas.

Hatfield learned the names of Pusey's Austin agents. Pusey was paying a lobbyist in the state legislature, and others at the capital.

Squatted in the closet, the Ranger sought to determine what his next move ought to be. If he could not halt Pusey soon it would become impossible. Pusey would wax too powerful. Colonel Jake Irvine and his Deep River ranchers would be only the first of the man's victims, for Pusey was making a wholesale grab at the fabulous forests of the Lone Star empire.

He jumped as an outside latch gave off a startlingly loud click. He heard voices, and one belonged to the man he was investigating—Cassius Pusey.

"Come in, Judge," ordered the lumber king. "We can talk in my private office without being disturbed."

The Ranger was trapped. There was no way out except the way he had come. The windows were on the street side and he had purposely left ajar the connecting portal from the anteroom. Pusey would certainly see him if he crossed the room.

He snapped off the slide of the bull's-eye lantern, squatting in the dark closet, adjusting its door so that he could see through a crack. It was too late to return the folder to the file drawer, attempt to close it and arrange things so Pusey could not see that the file had been disturbed. He would have to make the best of it.

PUSEY had struck a match. He lighted a candle and as Hatfield looked through the crack he saw the boss lumberman carrying the burning taper in a

[*Turn page*]

silver stick as he led his visitor to the inner sanctum. Pusey set the candlestick on his desk and removed the glass chimney from an oil lamp. He lit this and now the office was brightly illuminated.

"I like plenty of light," he said. "Here, take this armchair, Judge. It's more comfortable."

The Ranger could see the sharp visage of the lumber king, as Pusey pushed over a silver tray containing two bottles of liquor, glasses, and a box of cigars where they would be handy for the judge. The legal light was a roly-poly person with a bland visage decorated by a graying goatee, sideburns, and an upturned button nose which gave him a cherubic, innocent expression.

"Looks like Santa Claus," thought the Ranger.

The judge's black suit was wrinkled and he wore Congress gaiters. He poured himself three fingers of straight whiskey and downed it at a gulp, wiping his whiskers with the back of his coat sleeve.

"Mighty good likker, suh," he complimented. "Makes a man feel young again."

"Have another, Judge. Light up a cheroot."

Pusey drew his scalpel from his pocket, picking up a chunk of pine wood from a desk basket, and began whittling away. As the judge was holding a match to the cigar end, Pusey's eyes happened to pause on the open file drawer, and he swore, getting up and stepping over to shut it.

"Fool secretary forgot to close up the file tonight," he growled. "I'll give her a talkin' to about it. It's mighty hard to get efficient help these days, ain't it?"

"Shore is," agreed the judge blandly. He was sipping at a second long drink.

It was at least something for the hidden Ranger to realize that Doc Pusey had no inkling he was being shadowed. He felt entirely safe here in Fort Worth, his stronghold.

"Tell you what I want, Judge," he said blandly. "Warrants for the arrest of several parties on Deep River. Here are the names—Colonel Jake Irvine, Egbert Burley, Oliver Tate and Vernon Nolan. I think I'll add Burnell Gaines, Irvine's foreman. Make it for attempted killin's. I also want half a dozen John Doe warrants with blanks left, so I can fill in the names. Can you do it?"

The magistrate cleared his throat. There was a moment's pause.

Through the crack, Hatfield saw Doc Pusey put down the scalpel with which he had been whittling and extract a fat wallet from an inside pocket. Pusey took out money and laid it on the desk. The judge's rotund visage broke into a cherubic smile as a greedy hand clawed over the cash.

"Anything in my power will be done for you, suh," he promised fervently.

"Fine. You know, Judge, I've been lookin' for a man we can trust to run for the Supreme Court at the capital. I think I've found him."

"Yuh don't say!" The judge was pleased.

"You're it. I'm goin' a long way, and I'm a good man to hitch your wagon to. Watch my smoke."

Pusey was whittling furiously, shaping his wooden figure. Again the knife was not sharp enough to please him, so he brought out his oiled pocket stone and honed it to razor edge. The judge, happy with his third slug of Bourbon and the comforting bills in his pocket, beamed on his master.

"You have a real talent for that, suh. Mighty artistic. Why, that's a man in a cowboy hat. I can see it already."

Doc Pusey held up the little doll, he had been carving. Then he sliced the head off it with a single flick of the knife and tossed the body into the wastebasket.

"Habit I've got into," he said. He had a drink, then asked, "When can I get those warrants?"

"Tomorrow?"

"By noon. I'm leavin' for Sandtown on the three o'clock train."

"They'll be ready, I guarantee, suh. What fine whisky! Goes down smooth as silk."

"I'm goin' to give you a bottle from my private stock since you like it so much, Judge."

Doc Pusey pushed back his chair and jumped to his feet. A few steps brought him around his desk and across to the closet. He seized the handle and pulled the door wide open, disclosing the tall Ranger who straightened up, hat crown brushing the frame.

"Good evenin'," drawled Hatfield.

Doc Pusey was astounded. His wide jaw dropped and he blinked, hardly able to believe his eyes. He still gripped the

metal handle and was only arm's length from the big man towering before him.

As Hatfield calmly stepped out, Pusey fell back.

Hatfield could discount the fat judge who was gasping and sputtering in his chair. But Doc Pusey was dangerous and undoubtedly armed. Besides the lumber king seldom traveled without a bodyguard and his gunhands might be outside, waiting for their chief.

"What's this—what's this?" demanded the judge in a high voice. "Our talk was s'posed to be confidential, Pusey. That's why we done met here so we wouldn't be seen together. Who is this young feller?"

"I was just goin' to ask him that," snapped Pusey. The keen black eyes were riveted to the Ranger's gray-green orbs as Pusey tried to figure this out. "You're a holdup! We caught you!"

"If yuh call it catchin', yuh're right." Hatfield nodded easily.

His long hands hung limp, close to the stocks of the heavy Colts in their supple oiled holsters. He could draw and fire with lightning speed if Doc Pusey made a move to pull a gun. But Pusey was too shrewd to try it. He could estimate the tall stranger's ability.

Slowly Pusey backed off, taking care not to make any gesture his opponent could misconstrue. A darting glance toward the street told that Pusey must have aides out there, waiting by his carriage. If they looked through the windows they could see what was going on in the office.

"Young feller, you better sashay," warned the judge, alarmed that he might lose his recently acquired cash. "Yuh'll find yoreself dancin' at the end of a long rope if yuh ain't careful."

"Dry up, Fatty," ordered Hatfield, and started to glide toward the exit, keeping his back to the wall.

Pusey had glimpsed the file folder which lay on the closet floor, and now he put two and two together, recalling how a drawer had been open when he had come in.

"Wait a jiffy! Who sent you here, cowboy? Was it Jake Irvine?"

The lumber chief was getting warmer. His long body was rigid, tensed to spring. But with the steady gray-green gaze on him he dared not take the chance.

Hatfield gave a quick shake of his head, but Pusey was convinced.

"Did I see you in Sandtown, or at the Double Dot I? Weren't you in that bunch who ran us out of town?"

The first shock over, Pusey's brain was clicking and fast. He realized the danger threatening him in case the intruder might be an investigator retained by the Deep River ranchers. Pusey had encountered Hatfield only at a distance up till now, and then only in the excitement of battle as the Ranger had led the charge in Sandtown. At that time the officer had been on his golden sorrel, his Stetson pulled low, and a leather jacket covering the upper part of his body.

The judge had subsided, his rotund countenance scarlet with fear. He was breathing asthmatically, trembling in his gaiters. Physical struggle held no appeal for him.

Hatfield was at the connecting doorway, still facing in so he could watch Pusey.

"Don't go," ordered Pusey "I want to talk to you. You are working for Jake Irvine. I believe I saw you at Sandtown. Don't be a fool, now. I'll double the ante on whatever Irvine is paying you, and no hard feelin's. You must be a range detective. You weren't around the Double Dot I when I was there to see the Colonel."

The judge perked up and put in his oar. "I'm the law, young feller. You better listen to Dr. Pusey."

"I can use you myself, give you better money and a steady job," added Pusey hastily, trying to hold him.

"See yuh again, Pusey," called Hatfield, jumping back.

He knew he could not trust Pusey, certainly not under such circumstances. The lumber boss was only trying to get him into position so he could overcome the man he believed to be a spy.

CHAPTER XI

Brush

DOC PUSEY, seeing that guile would not win, threw himself behind his desk. He whipped a black-barreled six-shooter from a shoulder holster, cocked it, took deliberate aim across the flat top.

"Duck, Judge!" he yelled.

But Hatfield beat Pusey to the draw, getting off a hasty one which tore within inches of the panic-stricken judge who bleated and fell backward, flattening out and hugging the mat. The Ranger lead left a jagged furrow in the wood, and splinters stung Pusey's face. Confusion shook the lumberman's hand and his first shot flew high over the swiftly moving officer.

The imminence of death forced Pusey down. He pulled out of Hatfield's sight and stayed there, protected by the heavy desk, as he shouted warnings and instructions to his fighting men outside.

"Stop that tall cuss, boys! Stop him! Shoot him down! Hustle, hustle! Outlaw —holdup. Kill him!"

They were coming, summoned by the booming of the guns and Pusey's stentorian orders!

As Hatfield swung into the corridor leading through to the shop and on to the rear yard, the street door was shoved in. Three burly men burst in. Two were swaggering toughs, the third was Pusey's coachman. They had pistols up, ready for action.

But the Ranger was watching for them. His Colt crashed and roared in the confined space of the hall. His bullets rapped the door and kicked into the wall. The first rough to barge in fell back, bumped by the two behind him. Their tries for Hatfield were wild.

The Ranger saw Doc Pusey, a sawed-off shotgun gripped in his hands, for an instant, as the lumber king burst from the anteroom into the corridor.

"Come on, you fools, get him!" he howled in a transport of fury.

Yet when Doc Pusey himself glimpsed Hatfield gliding into the main shop, he jumped hastily back, for the Ranger's Colt was swinging on him. Pusey's finger contracted on the shotgun trigger, and the load of buck whooshed into the floor.

It took a few seconds for the Ranger to weave through the lathes and machine saws to the open window. He climbed through into the rear yard. A hoarse shout from his left warned him the enemy had run through a driveway from the road to cut him off. He crouched by the shadowed wall and fired to force them back.

Pusey was mustering assistance in the front street now, calling on men who had overheard the rumpus to help him. Hatfield had to get away from there before Pusey could bring help in force to concentrate on him.

He jumped up and flitted through the stacks. Shots came after him, and the alarm was bayed. Pusey and his reinforcements galloped through the lane into the yard and joined in. The Ranger dodged this way and that, knowing that Pusey would see to it that he died, if captured. And he had no desire to indulge in a pistol battle with the misguided Fort Worth citizens who had come to Doc Pusey's aid.

Reaching the high board fence, he scaled it by pulling himself and rolling over the top, landing on his hands and knees. He raced across the back road and ran for it, head down.

Pusey was frantic to overtake the tall man who had intruded on his privacy, knew his evil secrets. The lumberman's strident voice could be heard as he urged pursuers on. They tumbled over the fence and hunted furiously for the Ranger who had taken to the dark, cobblestoned street behind the lumber company's building.

Dodging this way and that, he eluded them, at last setting his course for the livery stable where he had left the gelding and his gear. Knowing that he had reached safety, and realizing how badly he needed sleep, he turned in, rolled in a blanket beneath a carriage shed. . . .

In the morning he breakfasted at a nearby restaurant. Saddling Goldy, he set off to the telegraph office adjoining the Fort Worth railroad station. The agent had a reply for him from Austin. He shucked off the envelope and eagerly read:

> OUR MAN IS BEHIND BILL LUMBER LOBBY HOPES TO SNEAK THROUGH LEGISLATURE SO THEY CAN GRAB TEXAS FORESTS. CHECK HIM THERE. I WILL HANDLE THIS END AND THANKS FOR THE WARNING. MCDOWELL.

A MAN in a black suit and hat, with its straight brim pulled to his prominent ears, entered from the main waiting room. He had a close-cropped black mustache. Deep-set eyes hardened as they fixed Hatfield.

"Hey, you!" he barked. "What's yore

handle? Where yuh think yuh're goin'?" A hand hastily slipped inside his coat, reaching for a hidden gun.

A breath later he froze, not daring to withdraw his hand. He was staring into the round muzzle of a Ranger Colt.

"Take it easy, chum," drawled Hatfield. "I'm just a stranger here."

The tough gulped. That hammer spur was back under the stranger's thumb and the heavy revolver could scarcely miss if it exploded.

"Mebbe I made a mistake," the man in black faltered.

Then the door at the other side of the telegraph office banged open. Two more men of the same stamp as the burly one pushed in. They were associates of the fellow under the gun and, seeing him in a pickle, they yelped and dived for their weapons.

Hatfield snapped his revolver around, beating them to it. The foremost rough fell flat on the worn wooden floor, baying like a hound in terror. The Ranger jumped for the exit behind him even as he fired close to the man-hunters, confusing them, gaining the time fractions he needed to get out of there.

But more men were around the railroad station. He ran full-tilt to where he had left Goldy, hearing the three who had discovered him bellowing for help.

"Pusey's hombres, all right!" he figured.

The lumber king must have decided that the tall fellow would try to leave Fort Worth by train and had covered the station. Perhaps he also had under guard other key avenues of departure—bridges and main highways. Pusey had had a good look at Hatfield in the lamplight and had issued an unmistakable description.

He reached his horse and sprang to his leather seat, keeping a Colt gripped in one hand, his keen eyes roving from point to point. For he knew that in the bright sunshine only speed could save him.

Half a dozen excited toughs, all armed with pistols and one with a shotgun, rushed for him, shooting as they came, yelling for him to halt. Further along the street he could see a couple more men standing with the reins of saddled mustangs in hand.

As he cut away from the station, his business finished in Fort Worth for the time being, a uniformed mounted policeman was galloping up to take part in the ruckus. With the influence Pusey had he naturally would have called in the local law, exciting the officers with his lies.

Fort Worth was fully awake to the new day by now. Workers were streaming into the factories while smoke from stacks stained the intense blue vault of the sky. The river gleamed in its bed below the bustling little city which was growing and spreading out as industries moved in and those already established increased their scope.

Hatfield sighted Cassius Pusey, on a buckskin horse, near the station. The hue-and-cry was mounting. Pusey had plenty of willing allies around town, and the chase was on!

Horsemen were now on the Ranger's trail. They could see him as he took to the middle of a wide avenue and trusted to the sorrel's fleetness. He held the Colt in his right hand, the hammer spur back and ready to shoot, for at any instant more of Pusey's hunters might loom in his path to cut him off.

For the sake of those ranchers back at the Double Dot I, there was just one thing he must do now. He *had* to get away!

* * * * *

BEHIND the Double Dot I bunkhouse, Sea Lion Burnell Ganies, sitting on the top corral rail, whistled "Buffalo Gals" gaily enough as he worked over a saddle. He sounded carefree, but he was well aware that trouble had come to the range, and without any dramatic gestures was ready to sacrifice his life for his employer, Colonel Irvine.

He was young and tough and optimistic, even if he did worry some about making things hum smoothly around the place.

Right now he had just consumed a hearty breakfast, it was a beautiful day, and when he thought of June Irvine he could not be sad.

"Mornin', Sea Lion," said a glum young voice behind him.

Gaines glanced over his shoulder. It was Jake Junior. In many ways the boy was his father's replica, but he was thin and needed filling out, though he could eat as much as two hired hands. At the present time his voice was changing, occasionally he would speak a few words

in a deep tone which would switch startlingly to a boyish treble without any warning. He was a good boy and a favorite with the cowboys who spoiled him as much as possible. Sea Lion loved him like a younger brother.

"Howdy, Jake!" Sea Lion said. "Nice day, ain't it? Want to give me a hand mendin' this saddle?"

Jake climbed up and let his long legs dangle down the rail fence.

"All right," he said lugubriously, and without much interest, though usually he was eager enough to hang around with the foreman and help out.

"What's eatin' yuh?" asked Sea Lion. "Are yuh sick?"

"Nope . . . Say, when do yuh s'pose Buck will be back?"

So that was it. Jake had taken a fancy to Buck Robertson. He was lonesome for another lad as a playmate.

"Oh, he'll show up one of these days, Jake," Sea Lion assured. "Yuh have to be philosophic about it, old feller."

"I savvy," Jake sighed. "Just the same I wish he'd ride up this minute. He's a real good shot. He's teachin' me to shoot offhand."

They were silent for a time, working on the leather which was so tough it was hard to get the needle through it.

"Pop wouldn't let me go along with Buck," Jake said then. "Said it was too dangerous. But shucks, we could have had a real high time together in town."

"Buck's four years older than you are, Jake," said Sea Lion gravely, trying to think of something to comfort his young friend and cheer him up. "Yore dad's right, keepin' yuh home. That bunch savvies yuh, anyways. Shore, they'd reckernize yuh and go after yuh if yuh poked yore nose into Sandtown."

"I reckon."

When the saddle was finished, Sea Lion and Jake got down and the foreman lugged the saddle over to the stable rack. Jake went to a stall to visit his mustang, a small gelding which had been a present from his father.

"Guess I'll go for a gallop, Sea Lion," said Jake, after a while, taking his saddle off the pegs on which it was racked.

"All right. But don't get out of sight of the house. Savvy?"

Jake shrugged, impatient of restraint. He could take care of himself, he thought. He had been on a mustang before he could really walk and was a first-class horseman. He cinched up and, jumping to his leather seat with practised ease, moved out of the yard.

Sea Lion Gaines had plenty to do around the ranch. Some of his boys were on guard at the river boom, while others circled out from the buildings. Cattle must be tended and Guarantee Stack's raiders watched for. There were management details too.

After a time Colonel Irvine called him into the office for a conference with the Deep River ranchers. They must make some plans, for Ranger Hatfield had not been heard from, nor had they any word of Buck Robertson whom Hatfield had planted as a spy in Sandtown.

The ranchers were growing more and more uneasy as to the fate of their homes and livestock. Outriders had reported seeing a few rustlers in the distance, but the enemy had been altogether too quiet. Irvine and his friends did not like it. It was not their style to sit and twiddle their thumbs while their world went up in smoke.

Finally they decided to make no move for the present, but to wait another twenty-four hours to hear from Ranger Jim Hatfield, who had advised them to lie low.

CHAPTER XII

Hostage

SEA LION returned to the yard. June came from the kitchen. He waved and she waved back. Slowly, glancing back over his shoulder, Gaines strolled around the stable and stood waiting. In a minute June joined him. Here they could not be seen from the house and were alone.

She stood there smiling up at him. Sea Lion had never told her of his love for her, had never kissed her. But the danger which had come upon them had bridged gaps and he felt closer to June now than he ever had before. It was the way that a soldier might feel, knowing he would have to go off to face death any day. Sea

Lion wondered if June felt the way he did.

"June," he said softly.

"What is it, Sea Lion?"

For answer, she was in his arms and he was kissing her. Joy flooded him as he realized that she was clinging to him, her lips giving him the response he craved. It was a moment out of a lifetime. And then:

"June—June!" Mrs. Irvine was calling. "Come and help me hang out this wash, dear."

June slipped out of Gaines' arms, her eyes telling him all he wanted to know. Then she was gone, leaving him feeling as though he were walking on air.

Before Sea Lion knew it, they were banging on the alarm, calling the hands to dinner. He went in to eat.

"Is Jake with you?" asked Mrs. Irvine. "I haven't seen him all morning."

"He was around earlier," replied Sea Lion. "He went for a ride."

Everybody who should have answered the call to dinner, except Jake Junior. Sea Lion began growing less and less satisfied. He gulped his meal, trying to hide his perturbation from the women. But as soon as he could get out he saddled his beautiful gelding, Night Star, and set out in the direction Jake had taken.

A quarter of a mile out, Lea Pope rode over to meet him.

"Seen young Jake?" demanded Sea Lion.

"He stopped to chew the fat with me a couple hours ago, but he ain't come back this way," replied the cowboy. "Said he thought he'd go over to the Mounds."

Sea Lion nodded and set his course. The Mounds were unusual rock outcroppings to be found where Indians of the region had camped at times for special ceremonies.

"He shouldn't have gone so far from home," growled Gaines.

Half an hour after speaking to Pope, Sea Lion sighted the dull-gray buttes. They covered several acres and narrow trails wound through the heart of the area. He saw nothing to warn him that there might be anything amiss although he was following the shod-hoof impressions of Jake's mustang which he had come upon as he had closed in.

He slowed Night Star and entered the rocks, cut off from the world by the steep gray sides. Suddenly he rounded a sharp turn, and a small clear area where grass and low brush grew opened before him. He saw Jake there, sitting on a flat stone. Over the boy towered Guarantee Gus Stack, the rustler leader. And surrounding the young prisoner were a dozen or more of the gunhands who rode for Stack, their horses standing near.

"Yuh little cuss, yuh pinked two of my men!" Stack was growling.

"He's Irvine's kid, I tell yuh," said a rustler.

At that instant two of them glanced in Sea Lion's direction, sighted the foreman, and let out whoops, throwing up their carbines and pistols.

Sea Lion, seeing Jake a prisoner of Guarantee Gus Stack, thought his heart had stopped. Jake must have tried to fight it out. He had carried a six-shooter, but wore no cartridge belt so he could not have held out long—just until he had exhausted the loads in the cylinders, and perhaps a few spare shells from his pockets. All this flashed in a twinkling through Sea Lion's mind. And the outlaws had scarcely yelped when he went into action, his teeth gritted, and a Colt blasting as he charged.

Single-handed, but at the towering height of a brave man's fury, Sea Lion Gaines chose to face any odds, a thousand to one if need be, in his attempt to save Jake. Even if he died it might offer the boy a chance to escape.

NIGHT STAR snorted and plunged forward, straight at the bandits, as the beautiful animal obediently answered his rider's call. When the rustlers saw Sea Lion coming, shooting with everything he had, several of them thought only of escape, sliding around the nearest butte. But others instantly let go with carbines and pistols.

Gaines was down low in the saddle as he urged Night Star on. Concentrated lead ripped into the gelding and he faltered, crashing to the sandy gray earth. Sea Lion managed to kick his toes free of the tapped stirrups. Flying clear as the heavy horse went down, the man landed on his side, rolling over and over as spurts of grit kicked up around him.

The fighting rustlers were on the move. Guarantee Gus Stack had seized Jake by the scruff of the neck and raised him.

Red rage shook Sea Lion to the core, every fibre of him seeking to close with the enemy. But he dared not fire at Stack for fear of hitting Jake, and in a few jumps Guarantee Gus disappeared around a high rock not far off, out of Gaines's sight.

All the outlaws were taking cover from Sea Lion's hot fire. But their hasty replies were too close and he threw himself into a shallow nest of boulders which gave him some protection. He had fewer and fewer targets, for they were fading away on the other margin of the Mounds.

Sea Lion's breath burned in and out of his gasping lungs. The jolting fall had shaken him, but he would not admit it. He would drive on and on, he told himself. Only death could check him.

The little opening among the massive buttes was deserted. Night Star, his handsome mount, and worth a year's pay, to say nothing of the affection which Gaines had held for his horse, was stiffening in the sunlight a few yards away. Dust still slowly rose in the warm air. A slug ricocheted off a rock a foot over Sea Lion's head and shrieked off behind him.

They were now firing at him from the edge of a butte. But it was a weak fire. He had regained some wind and, jumping up, he rushed, reckless of their metal. They quit the spot and when he tore up to the turn of the Mounds he saw that they had mounted and were flogging south.

Four of them were following after Guarantee Stack and the main bunch. The quartet had been left as a rear guard to pin Sea Lion as Stack left the field with his prize, for Guarantee Gus knew he had a valuable hostage in Irvine's son. Sea Lion could see Jake's mustang being driven before the fleeing riders while the boy was held in front of the powerful rustler chief. With armed killers close about him it was useless for Jake to struggle, and at any time the slim lad was no match for Stack.

Sea Lion's eyes smarted and the blood pounded in his veins. Running in his high-heeled, spurred riding boots was difficult, but he went dashing after Stack's band.

"Come back and fight!" he bellowed.

A sharp heel broke through a field mouse's burrow and threw him. It brought his senses back, and the realization that he had not the slightest chance of overtaking them on foot. If he did, they would riddle him long before he could get close enough to do any good.

He turned and limped back to the Mounds, making the best speed he could. He passed his Night Star, dead on the field of battle. Loss of his horse was a terrible blow, yet so concerned was he over Jake's fate that his grief was only a secondary consideration.

When he reached the north rim of the Mounds he saw three horseman flogging toward him. He recognized Pope and two more Double Dot I cowboys and signaled them. Soon they came up with him and he quickly imparted the terrible news to them.

Pope's horse carried double as they galloped back to the ranch and reported to Colonel Irvine. All the ranchers, and all their men reached a unanimous decision, a decision which Irvine would make only for himself.

"As for me," said Irvine, "I'm goin' to Sandtown and hit 'em now! He's my son. I can't ask yuh to foller me."

"We're all with yuh," said Horseface Tate instantly. There was no dissenting voice.

"It means a tough fight, gents," drawled Irvine.

He was checking over the guns in his office rack and making ready. He spoke calmly, and his voice was controlled, but the flesh around his eyes was white.

They could hear Mrs. Irvine, June, and the other women softly crying in the main room.

SEA LION GAINES had his wind back and also his savvy. He knew, as did the others, that they would be riding into a death trap when they attacked the settlement, held by Stack and Ox Evans with plenty of guns at their disposal. But they were going anyhow. Some of them should smash through and seek to take young Jake from the enemy.

Every available man was mustered at the Double Dot I. Shotguns, carbines and Colts were loaded and spare belts filled with ammunition. Extra shells were dropped into pockets. The mustangs were saddled, cinches tightened and buckled. Irvine silently inspected the array of grim fighters and gave a brief nod.

"Come on, boys," he ordered.

The women watched from the long veranda as their loved ones rode off to the fight.

Sea Lion Gaines glanced back over his shoulder. June stood with her arm around her shaken mother. The foreman raised his hand to wave a reply to June. Unless he was lucky it would be the last time he would see her, for Sea Lion meant to be in the van of the battle. His first towering fury had been replaced by a dull but steady anger which drove him inexorably on. . . .

Far out across the range, Ranger Jim Hatfield leaned forward in his saddle as he peered ahead for Sandtown. Night had fallen over the Deep River country and a faint glow hung over the settlement which now was held by Doc Pusey's bunch. The moon had not yet risen, but the sky to the left was lightening the horizon, promising that the night would be bright.

He had cut across country as he had neared Sandtown, avoiding the beaten ways, for he knew they would be watched close to the town. Pine woods and rough areas had forced detours, but he had made it.

The escape from Fort Worth had been successful because of the sorrel's fleetness, for Goldy had outrun Pusey's pursuit. In open country Hatfield had left them behind and set his course for Deep River. It was his intention to find Buck Robertson, see if anything new had broken during his absence.

Pusey, if he had caught the train from Fort Worth as he had intended, might be expected in Sandtown the next morning, unless the lumber king rode over from the junction, in which case he might show up in Sandtown by midnight.

"He'll be on the prod after catchin' me in his office," Hatfield thought.

It would not be a surprise to him if Pusey made a tremendous all-out effort to crush Irvine now.

The golden sorrel was ever on the alert and his animal senses were keener than any man's. Hatfield trusted to Goldy for warnings in the darkness. But the Ranger was vigilant from habit, his gray-green eyes moving from side to side as he rode. And he tried to detect sounds of danger on the wind.

When he reached the heights northeastward of Sandtown, pine groves, rocks, and brush interposed between him and the settlement. He began working along a little feeder which emptied into Deep River above the town.

About a quarter of a mile out from town, Goldy rippled his handsome hide and sniffed.

At once Hatfield pulled up. He cocked an ear to the west wind soughing in the pines. Again the sorrel informed him that something was ahead of them.

The man slid from his sweated saddle and crept forward. The brook here fell several feet, its babling voice echoing in the woods and making it difficult to distinguish other noises. He had to work around in order to descend the hill, and almost ran into a large group of men gathered in a natural clearing.

Hatfield froze. They were talking in low tones. His first guess was they must be some of Guarantee Stack's bunch. The light was poor but he could make out the glint of a steel gun-barrel here and there.

Because the wind was blowing from them toward him, added to the purling of the feeder, they had been prevented from noting his stealthy approach. The steady, droning voice of someone standing in the middle of the group paused for a moment.

CHAPTER XIII

Death Stalks the Range

QUIETLY Hatfield was about to back off, and try another way through to Sandtown, when one of the squatting band spoke up.

"I'll bet they got him at the Wolf," his voice barked sharply.

"Hush!" somebody else reproved. "The wind's our way, but they may have sentries this far out."

Hatfield had jumped in his boots as he heard that distinctive bark.

"Sea Lion Gaines!" he thought, and immediately wondered what the foreman and the men with him were doing in such a spot.

They were his friends, but he had to hail them without startling them into shooting.

"It's Ranger Hatfield, Sea Lion!" he called softly, but so that they could catch his words.

The effect was electric. Most of the men leaped to their feet, guns rising as they whirled in Hatfield's direction. Instinctive reaction nearly sent a volley of slugs at him, keyed up as they were.

"Hold everything!" snapped an authoritative voice, the voice of Colonel Jake Irvine. "Is that you, *amigo?*"

"Yes suh," replied Hatfield. "I'm comin' in."

He could see the whites of rolling eyes and the faint sheen of faces, as they watched him with guns in hand. In a jiffy he was shaking hands with Irvine and Sea Lion, hearing the story of young Jake's capture in a rush of words.

"We sent scouts to look things over," Irvine explained. "It was plain we'd never get within a hundred yards of any buildin's in the daylight. Stack has a lot more gunhands he's hired and all them lumberjacks are waitin' for us to come. They would have picked us off from loop-holes without showin' themselves. I refused to let the boys commit suicide that way."

"Yuh done right," growled the Ranger, perturbed as he learned the sad tidings. "Yuh'd have ridden right into their hands."

"We drew off, and after dark fell we circled so as to come in from this direction, without havin' to cross the river to reach town. Decided to dismount and split up, try to take the Wolf and the buildin's close to it."

Hatfield squatted down, thinking it over. They were silent, waiting for the tall officer's decision.

"Yuh might do better at night than in broad daylight, but even so yuh'll lose a lot of men," he said at last. "Do yuh savvy where they're holdin' the boy?"

"We ain't shore," answered Irvine. "Sea Lion believes he's at the Wolf and I reckon I agree."

The Ranger turned it over in his shrewd mind.

"Tell yuh what, gents," he said then. "I'll go in and get hold of Buck. By now he'll have found just where Jake is locked up. I might even be able to bring Jake out without makin' it mass slaughter for yuh. Here's what yuh must do. Head north, cross the road and the river out of sight of town, then start a ruckus as though yuh aim to charge the bridge. I want yuh to draw as many of Guarantee's men as possible. Savvy?"

The plan was bold in conception and had a chance of success. They listened with fresh hope to the Ranger's instructions.

"Leave Sea Lion on this side with half a dozen picked men," went on Hatfield. "They'll hold the hosses and give us a hand if we make it. And if I fail, then yuh can try yore frontal assault. Fact, I'll lead it myself if I'm still kickin'."

They were satisfied. Colonel Irvine led his main forces off through the woods, while Sea Lion Gaines, Pope, and several more hard-fighting cowboys remained with Hatfield.

The Ranger made his swift preparations. He discarded the tall Stetson and bound his black hair with his bandanna. He smeared dirt on his face and hands to hide the shine of the skin. Moccasins from his saddle-bag replaced his spurred boots. He left his carbine in its boot and, taking off his cartridge belt, thrust loaded Colts inside his waist. This would prevent any possible metallic rattle which might betray him.

Warned by what he had just learned, he knew that Guarantee Gus Stack and Ox Evans would be on the prod, and it would take Apache cunning to reach the center of the settlement. He did not forget his long knife, carrying it in a sheath at his back ribs.

Now he was ready. With the others he rode to the rim of the trees. Ahead lay Sandtown, lights on, ominously inviting. There was no music tonight, though, and only a few sounds drifting through the night.

HALF an hour went by. And suddenly blasts of gunfire, Rebel yells shrilling on the breeze, broke across Deep River.

"Yell if yuh want us," growled Sea Lion, touching the Ranger's shoulder.

Outlaws were flitting across the plaza as they were drawn toward the bank by the sham attack. There would be sentries left on this side, yet the crashing noise would be a help. Hatfield glided forward, his moccasined feet making no sounds. He was a shadow in the night, keeping to

the darker patches.

Close in, he bellied down to reach a shed a hundred yards behind the Wolf. The guns and yells kept on to the west as Guarantee Stack, leading the gunslingers, sought to draw in their prey.

Hatfield essayed the hoot of an owl, counted three, gave it again, hands cupped to direct the prearranged signal toward the Wolf. He repeated this, checked to make sure none of Stack's sentinels were coming his way, then crept to the stable just back of the Wolf, the spot where he had last spoken with Buck Robertson.

Pressed against the wooden wall, he waited. Buck might be too far off to catch the signal.

Then a slim figure appeared for a moment in the lighted rear entry of the Wolf—Buck. Inside of a couple of minutes his young aide slipped around the corner and gripped his hand.

"Jim!" Buck whispered excitedly. "They got Jake Junior a prisoner!"

"I savvy. I met Irvine and Sea Lion. The whole caboodle are out there. Do yuh savvy where they're keepin' the kid?"

"In the Ox's room. It's that rear corner one on the opposite side from Carr's. And listen! Evans has made a hundred or so hand bombs. He's up there now, guardin' Jake. I ain't seen a chance of helpin', so I kept quiet and watched."

"Yuh're a smart hombre, Buck. Yuh reckon we could get Jake off?"

"Might. How yuh figger it?"

"Sea Lion's waitin' not far off with hosses. Irvine and his men will keep up that fake attack for half an hour more. How about the balcony? Does the Ox's window open on it?"

"Yeah but usually he keeps his door bolted."

"Can yuh move through the Wolf without bein' watched and stopped?"

"Shore. I work there. I've made myself useful, Jim, waitin' on those cusses of Stack's and purtendin' I admired their talk and ways. They even told me I could join up when I was old enough."

"Good boy. Here's how, then. I'll shin up and get beside the balcony window. You go up to the corridor and fiddle with the latch of the Ox's door as though yuh were tryin' to sneak in, but keep out of line in case he goes off half-cocked and fires through the panel. If I snatch out Jake I'll lower him over the balcony rail and let him drop, then jump myself. It ain't too far. He and I will hotfoot it to Sea Lion. If yuh ain't exposed durin' the play, stick in town. I need yuh here."

Buck peeked around the stable corner.

"Ssh!" he whispered. "Here comes a sentinel—one of Stack's men."

The shooting and yelling continued across Deep River. Hatfield crouched as a man carrying a shotgun stopped between the back door of the Wolf and the barn, staring in his direction. Perhaps the fellow had caught something, or he might have seen Buck's dark figure as the boy went to join Hatfield.

The gunhand shrugged and turned, taking a step or two along the back lane. If he was on a regular beat he might spell disaster when the Ranger sought to retreat.

"Better get him now," breathed Hatfield to Buck. "Keep back."

He gave a sharp cough which the guard heard. It stopped him and he swung quickly.

"Who's that?" he called.

The man with the shotgun came rapidly toward the corner where Hatfield was crouched for a spring. As the man neared, the Ranger launched himself through the air, driven by the power in his long legs. He dared not miss. The shotgun flew from the sentry's grip, and viselike fingers closed on the throat. In a flash Buck hit him from behind, and the outlaw folded up in Hatfield's arms.

They laid the senseless guard out behind the stable. Buck hastened back into the Wolf while Hatfield shinned up to the balcony. He crept around to the far side. For moments it was ticklish work, going over the front of the saloon, but he kept low and the town defenders were busy with Irvine's stabbing feints.

SLOWLY he came under the Ox's window. It was open but a horse blanket had been hung inside it. Hatfield had to proceed by ear, and this was difficult with the ruckus going on near the river.

Then he caught the rattle of a metal latch. That must be Buck at work.

He reached out and pushed the edge of the blanket aside just enough to peer in. Ox Evans sat on a stool only a few feet away. The giant lumberjack was staring

intently at the door on the opposite side of the room. He had picked up a cocked revolver.

The door latch clicked again. In a sweep of the eye Hatfield took it all in, the boxes the Ox had been using as a workbench, the empty cans used as holders for explosives he had been packing and fusing. Several stacks of these crude but murderous grenades stood ready in a corner.

Last, but not least, he saw the thin form of Jake Junior lying on the bunk, his hands tied by a rawhide thong, his scared eyes on the mighty Ox, whose black beard bristled as he prepared to deal with a possible intruder. Ox Evans had been left to hold the valuable prisoner while Guarantee Gus Stack and his outlaws attempted to draw Irvine's cowmen in and crush them.

There was nothing to gain by delay so Hatfield thrust a leg over the sill, hopped in and straightened inside the room.

"Reach!" he snapped.

At his terse order the Ox jumped several inches off his seat. Young Jake's face lighted with quick hope and he gave a low cry of joy. Rolling off the cot he stood up, close to Hatfield, his hands still tied and one end of the thong secured to the bunk leg. The Ox looked hastily over a hunched shoulder.

There was no time for anything much, no chance to push Jake out of the line of fire, for the Ox chose to fight. He knew the tall, grim man standing with spread feet before him. The smudged face and bandanna covering the hair could not disguise the mighty Ranger.

Evans held a cocked pistol he was bringing around. Action flared up in the wink of an eye.

A hoarse roar of hate welled up in Ox Evans' heavy throat. His eyes flashed redly. He meant to kill. Hatfield dared not permit the Ox to get fully turned into firing position. Even if the Ox's slugs missed him, Hatfield, they would fly on in Jake's direction and perhaps mortally wound the boy.

Hatfield must shoot, and shoot with deadly skill to down the Ox before the mighty lumberjack could get off that lead. It had to be an instantly deadly shot, for a man of such toughness could sometimes catch metal enough to halt three ordinary opponents, and still have enough drive left to wreak terrible havoc before he collapsed.

Hatfield's thumb flicked off the hammer spur of his Colt, steady on the Ox's heart. The revolver recoiled against the palm of his trained hand and its voice filled the confined space of the hotel room with crashing, deafening sound.

He hit his target exactly where he had aimed and yet the Ox was still raising his right arm despite the horrible, startled grimace twisting his ugly, black-bearded face. His gun was coming into line.

The echoes of Hatfield's first shot were joined by the explosions of his others as Hatfield let go again, and then a third time. The .45 slugs thudded into the huge Ox. Evans' weapon exploded and the bullet kicked up splinters between Jake and the Ranger, hardly a foot in front of them.

Hatfield lunged. His left hand thrust out and his straight-arm, with all his weight behind it, caught the Ox. Evans was shuddering violently as he sought to take his enemy along with him. But the blow was enough to turn the stricken giant. He was mortally hit, the spirit leaving him.

His bulldog jaw sagged and his arms dropped. Suddenly he crumpled to the floor.

Hatfield kicked the pistol from the relaxing fingers and picking it up, thrust it in his pants belt.

"Jim, Jim!" Buck's softly insistent voice reached him, and he glided over and pulled the bolt so the young fellow could come in.

"Watch the corridor and stairs," ordered the Ranger. "Give an owl's hoot if there's danger."

CHAPTER XIV

Deadly Plans

YOUNG JAKE was gulping, speechless. Buck's eyes widened as he saw what was left of the Ox lying there in a heap. He waved to Jake and hurried off to post himself as Hatfield had told him.

With his sharp knife Hatfield cut Jake's bonds.

"Get out on the balcony and crouch

down in the shadow till I join yuh, Jake," he ordered. "I'll be right along."

He had an eye on those grenades. A gunnysack containing some of the Ox's belongings lay in a corner and he shook it out and dropped a number of the fused cans into it, but could not take them all for the weight was too great. He knew he would need to run for it with Jake Junior.

"Hoo—hoo!"

That was Buck warning him. The shots upstairs had been heard and someone was coming to investigate.

Hatfield went out the window. Jake was waiting for him at the back end of the balcony. The Ranger dropped the sack and seized Jake's wrists. He lowered the boy, who was light, as far as he could over the railing. When he let go, Jake landed in sandy earth below.

The sack holding the grenades went next and Jake made a skillful catch of it. Hatfield let himself down, holding for a moment to the edge of the balcony, then falling. It was not far enough to jolt him.

"Come on, Jake," he said hurriedly. "Sea Lion's waitin' out there for us."

He started Jake along and they ran for the stable, on through the dark patches. There was a brief but glad reunion with Sea Lion Gaines and other Double Dot I men as the puffing pair reached them.

"On yore hosses, boys!" ordered Hatfield.

He glanced back at the lighted Wolf. Figures of men were emerging from the rear of the saloon and shouts of alarm were rising over Sandtown. Men were calling to Guarantee Stack and others that the Ox was downed and the valuable hostage flown.

Away from the settlement, Hatfield swung to Sea Lion Gaines.

"You and yore men make a dash straight for home, Sea Lion," he announced. "I'll go pull off Colonel Irvine and the rest of 'em."

"Yes suh, Ranger." Sea Lion was so relieved and delighted at Jake's rescue that he was bubbling with joy.

The Double Dot I men rode off into the night. The moon was coming up, throwing a silver light over the scene. Hatfield rounded the town and swam the sorrel across Deep River. He galloped up the west side to find Irvine, who was still keeping up his fake attack. Bullets sang back and forth across the stream.

It took time to locate the Colonel, who was riding up and down, directing the noisy battle.

"We got young Jake out, Colonel!" reported the Ranger. "He's safe and sound."

"Yuh don't mean it!" Irvine leaned over in his saddle to clasp Hatfield's hand as he sought to express his gratitude.

Everybody perked up at the good news. The shrill Rebel yells took on a new note of defiance and triumph.

"Call off yore men," advised the Ranger. "No use wastin' any more lead."

Colonel Irvine gave the commands and the cowboys and their rancher employers rode away from the river. No one had been hit, for they had not closed with Guarantee Gus Stack's augmented army that was holding Sandtown. The rustlers had stayed behind the protection of the buildings on the east bank, hoping to lure the attackers into crossing, so they could be wiped out.

The cavalcade headed for the Double Dot I. All were weary, but jubilant, and Irvine could scarcely wait to look upon his son. They arrived before dawn and found the house lighted. Mrs. Irvine, June and the rest were feeding Jake Junior, and fussing over him, listening with bated breath to his story.

THE following night Hatfield approached Sandtown from the chaparral to the east. He left the sorrel and, fixing himself up for an Indian stalk, crept in, giving an owlhoot signal which brought Buck Robertson to the rear of the Wolf's stable.

"What holds?" asked the Ranger. "Is Pusey back?"

"He's here," replied Buck. "Pulled in about dawn with a passel of armed toughs he fetched from Fort Worth. Hair-oil Carr's with him, too."

"Have yuh learned anything new?"

"I ain't shore of much except that Doc Pusey's ripsnortin' mad at losin' Ox Evans. And when he heard they'd had their paws on young Jake Irvine and had let him be snatched back he was fit to be tied." Buck's teeth showed in a grin at recollection of Pusey's towering rage. "He's ready to slice anybody to ribbons with that funny knife of his. I believe

Pusey aims to take command hisself and is plannin' somethin' plumb mean. They're up in Carr's room right now."

"*Bueno*. I'm goin' to try and hear what goes on. Stand watch for me below."

There was a sentry pacing behind the Wolf. Buck, just a lowly member of the Wolf's staff to the outlaws, and who had ingratiated himself with them, strolled up to the guard and offered him a smoke. While the outlaw was rolling his quirly and lighting up, Hatfield crossed the narrow back lane and shinned up to the rear of the balcony.

The lithe, silent Ranger snaked along. He could catch Pusey's strident voice before he came up beside Carr's window, open in the warm night.

Hair-oil Carr was in there and the rangy, bowlegged Guarantee Gus, listening to Pusey's ravings.

"I tell you I won't stand for any more!" stormed Pusey.

He was whittling with ill-contained violence, the shavings flying under the glinting scalpel blade. He slashed the head from the wooden doll he had carved and hurled the pieces to the floor, jumping up to pace back and forth with the impatient savagery of a caged tiger.

"I guarantee to bust them ranchers wide open, given a little time." Stack sounded sullen as though he did not enjoy the tongue dressing he had received from Pusey.

"Time, time! I'm sick of it! We've got plenty of men for an all-out attack on Irvine's. The whole caboodle of 'em, every cuss we're after, is holed up there at the Double Dot I. One big smash will settle it around here."

"Yeah, yeah, but those ranchhouse walls are mighty thick," objected Stack. "Yuh said so yoreself. They can cut us to ribbons before we get in. My boys are the best fightin' men in Texas, but I ain't askin' 'em to stand up and be shot without a chance of hittin' back."

Pusey's face was scarlet. He seemed about to burst with his fury.

"You fool, do you think I intend to attack in broad daylight? Or even in the darkness without proper preparations? Before the moon rises some of our men can get in close and hurl the grenades. They'll blast a hole big enough for the Confederate Army to ride through!"

Guarantee Gus thought it over. "All right," he agreed at last. "I'll do it. But before I guarantee it yuh'll have to promise me a better split. My boys will ask for higher pay if they have to do much fightin', and I want a fifty-fifty share of what yuh're makin'. I understand it's plenty."

Stack thought that he was a shrewd customer, but compared to Pusey he was a child as far as thinking processes went.

"Very well," agreed Pusey, without quibbling.

Hatfield had overheard Doc Pusey's original estimate of Stack, and the lumber king's future plans for the disposal of the grasping outlaw. Pusey would make use of Guarantee Gus as long as he needed him, then destroy the rustler chief.

Stack looked Pusey right in the eye. "How about a down payment?" he suggested.

DOC PUSEY nodded, reached in a pocket and drew out a bulging wallet. He peeled off bills and pressed them into Stack's itching palm.

"*Bueno—bueno,*" purred Guarantee Gus, his good humor restored.

He poured another drink and picked a cheroot from the box on the table, biting off the end and hitting the cuspidor dead center when he ejected it from his lips.

"Yes, suh," he informed, "yuh done a real good job for yoreself when yuh called in me for this job. I'll have them stupid cow chasers pushin' up the grass roots before yuh can whittle another of them wooden dollies. Trust me. I guarantee everything. Of course yuh'll throw in yore lumberjacks, and the hombres yuh fetched from Fort Worth. They'll take orders from me in the field."

"Oh, no," said Pusey. "I'll run this show, Stack. Get that straight here and now. I don't want any more slips. Either you do it my way or the deal's off."

Guarantee Gus essayed another eye-to-eye contest but Pusey stood firm.

"All right," Stack drawled finally. "I'll relay yore commands to my riders. They ain't the sort who'll listen to everybody." He was jealous of his prerogatives.

"You'll be right with me all the way through," promised Pusey.

Wolfish howls rose from the saloon and a drunken fool kept shouting, "Whoop-whoop-whoopee!" over and over again.

The building shook with thudding feet as men jumped up and down in frontier dances and other antics.

"Listen to that!" exclaimed Doc Pusey, disgustedly. "Your men have raised the roof in this town, Stack. The citizens are kickin' about it. Nobody dares show his nose on the street after dark. You round 'em up, take 'em to the sawmill and sober the cusses up. Keep 'em there until I'm ready. I don't give a shavin' in the fire below what they do elsewhere, but I want them in shape for the battle. And just now I'm not pinin' to draw further attention to this area until I'm in full control. Complaints have been sent to Austin. I caught a Texas Ranger snoopin' in my Fort Worth office, a man who had already fought us here in Sandtown."

"Huh?" Guarantee Gus licked the whisky off his upper lip and looked sour. "Which hombre yuh talkin' about?"

Pusey gave a swift, accurate description of Jim Hatfield. Stack whistled.

"I seen that sidewinder. He did act salty. How yuh savvy he's a Ranger?"

"First I thought he might be a range detective, when I came on him in my private office. I posted men through the city and they nearly downed him at the telegraph office. I managed to buy a copy of the wire he received. It was from Captain Bill McDowell, chief of Rangers in the capital. I've taken steps to check them in Austin."

Through bribery or other illegal means, perhaps by enlisting a Fort Worth lawman or getting his magistrate friend to sign a court order, Pusey had obtained that message sent by McDowell. It had been addressed to Hatfield at Fort Worth. Pusey knew just who McDowell was and now was aware of the tall Ranger's identity and his reason for being here.

At the moment there was no way to warn McDowell of this development. The Sandtown station was closed for the night. He thought of leaving a telegram for Buck to send in the morning, but decided against it. Pusey would keep the agent under surveillance after what had occurred in Fort Worth.

Pusey was recapitulating his plans.

"I'm in command on Friday. We join forces for the scrap. We have plenty of grenades made up and before the moon rises picked men will creep in close and blow the ranchhouse walls. We're to down Irvine, Tate, Burley and Nolan. And the fewer others left kickin' the less fuss there will be later on."

Hatfield backed away. At the rear he glanced over the railing and watched the pacing sentinel pass just beneath him, the armed guard going on, and turning. Buck was slouched against the doorpost outside the exit.

The Ranger slid down the water pipe and clucked softly to his young assistant. The way was clear for a moment and he crossed the narrow way and waited in the black shadow behind the stable.

Soon Buck joined him.

"There's goin' to be a mass attack Friday night," the Ranger informed his young aide. "I've got to figger how to check it before it starts, or there'll be terrible slaughter."

"Friday!" said Buck. "That's only two days! It ain't long, Jim!"

"Yuh're right. A lot of Irvine's pards are goin' to get hurt once that passel of polecats arrives at the ranch."

"What yuh want me to do?"

"Stick here and keep an eye on Doc Pusey and Hair-oil Carr. But don't shove yore neck out, savvy? Yuh're in a good position, so hold it."

He said good-by to Buck and returned to Goldy.

CHAPTER XV

Ranger Strategy

LEAVING the vicinity of Sandtown, Hatfield crossed Deep River and started for the Double Dot I. He was busy thinking over all that he had learned, shaping his strategy.

"Buck's right," he thought. "Two days ain't long, but we got to use what time there is."

So far, Irvine and the other Deep River ranchers had just about managed to hold their own in the fierce war Doc Pusey had started to tear their range from them. The new gunhands enlisted by Guarantee Gus Stack, or brought from Fort Worth by the lumber king in his entourage, when added to the existing forces of lumber-

jacks and the regular rustler band would be overwhelming. Deadly grenades hurled at the walls or through the windows at Irvine's would stun and rip the defenders, making Pusey's task much easier.

"Only one answer," Hatfield decided, as he rode swiftly for the Double Dot I. "It's a big gamble, but we'll have to take it."

Sea Lion Gaines' patrolling cowboys challenged him as he neared the big house.

Hatfield identified himself and was passed through the cordon. It was not long before dawn when the tired Ranger turned in at the bunkhouse. He had reached his decision and this made him feel better.

What lay ahead called for a steady mind and hand. A few hours sleep would help.

The responsibility rested heavily upon him. Colonel Irvine and his fighting men would do just as he suggested. They would follow him to the end of any trail he picked. They were fine folks and he knew them well now, knew their loved ones, their hopes and fears.

He could not fail with such people depending on him. . . .

The sun was ruby red over the Deep River range as Ranger Jim Hatfield told the ranchers of the defense he had worked out as the only check for Doc Pusey's vicious attack.

They listened gravely as his quiet but firm voice pointed out the dangers in case they should fail, if there should be a slip. Irvine, Horseface Tate, Eg Burley, Vern Nolan and Sea Lion Gaines were his conferees.

"It's a mighty bold idea, Ranger," Colonel Jake nodded. "However, as yuh say, we'll be in the soup over our Stetsons if we don't make it."

"We can't set here and wait for 'em to come," said Hatfield. "That means death and injuries to a bunch of yuh, mebbe to the women and kids. Explodin' bombs don't pick and choose their targets. They'll do a lot more damage yuh can't afford, what with the losses yuh've already sustained. Tonight's our last chance. And we'll have to hustle to get ready."

Jake Irvine looked around the circle of sober men in the office. Everybody nodded, for Hatfield's logic was irrefutable.

"Tell us just what to do," said Irvine calmly.

"First," the Ranger told them, "get yore guns and ammunition ready. We also have that gunnysack of grenades I fetched from the Ox's stock. We don't dare start till it's dark for they may have watchers posted at a distance to tip off Pusey when we move. We'll sift off in small bands and join on the west side of Deep River a mile below Sandtown." He gave them a few more instructions, and the rancher conference disbanded.

The day passed all too rapidly. Preparations had to be completed, and naps were snatched so that the fighting men would not be exhausted when the crucial test came.

Circling sentinels about the Double Dot I reported seeing two or three riders on the heights above the ranch. It was believed these were Stack's spies, keeping an eye on the main center of resistance to Pusey's ambitions. The Ranger's precautions were certainly justified.

As soon as dark fell the first bunch of horsemen set off, with Hatfield in the lead. Irvine, Sea Lion Gaines, Tate and such leaders commanded other contingents.

The night was well along when the several bands from the Double Dot I came together at the rendezvous and listened to the Ranger's last-minute instructions. The tall officer from Austin had stained his hands and face, and wore his moccasins. His Stetson, spurred boots, cartridge belts and carbine were fastened to Goldy's saddle.

"Yuh cross and get into position with the main forces," ordered Hatfield. "When yuh hear me, Colonel Irvine, rush and rush hard. *Adios* and luck."

"Luck, Ranger," growled Jake Irvine.

SEA LION GAINES and half a dozen cowboys were detailed to trail Hatfield for a special task assigned them.

All were aware that the tall officer was assuming the most hazardous rôle. Few men could essay what he had planned to do and come through alive. He nodded, raised a hand, and turning up the river, rode off. Sea Lion and his handful of riders came slowly after him, giving him time to make his play, while Colonel Irvine began moving his contingent across to the east bank.

The moon was fully up now, and the land much too bright for Hatfield's liking, but it was impossible to have all condi-

tions just as he would have desired, and they were so pressed for time. He kept on the west side of Deep River until Sandtown's glow in the sky was not far away. The sawmill, lying just south of the settlement, was indicated by the small dots of light made by lanterns hung at various spots.

Brush and cottonwoods grew along the bank of the river, and in that cover he hid the golden sorrel close to the lapping water. He had brought along a waterproof bag holding several of the fused grenades he had seized in Ox Evans' room at the Wolf the night he had shot the lumberjack boss. Now he dropped his loaded pistols in the sack and made sure that the drawstring was tightly closed and that the overflap was secured so that no water could leak in.

He crouched in the chaparral on the west bank and, for a while, studied the sawmill, knowing that even in the moonlight which glistened on the moving current it would be difficult to spot him, with his face and hand blackened.

The Pusey forces had sentries along the road and at both ends of the big building. Hatfield noted that the west wall was built out over the river on a rock formation. It extended upstream at a forty-five degree angle and diverted water into the race to increase the force against the wheel. A boxlike shed roofed the moving blades.

Logs from rafts brought downstream could be steered into the canal and shunted into the mill where the water-powered saws cut them into the desired lengths and shapes. A guard prevented logs from bumping into the wheel blades.

The slowly turning giant wheel groaned and creaked as it was pushed around by the current. Lumber piles stood around the yard and Hatfield could make out lines of picketed mustangs just north of the sawmill, which told him that most of Guarantee Stack's killers must be around. They seldom moved more than a few steps without mounts.

The Ranger checked on the sentry beats and figured how much time he could count on to get across the river. Sea Lion Gaines had strict instructions on just what he was to do, and would keep back out of sight and hearing until the proper moment. And Hatfield had to be certain that Colonel Irvine and the main party had reached position before he made a final move himself.

Now and then a half-submerged tree branch or other piece of flotsam made a small break in the stream as it slowly drifted past. Distant strains of music and a low hum came from Sandtown.

Keeping behind the irregular wall of brush on his side of Deep River, Hatfield crept on until he figured he was far enough north of the sawmill so that he would not have to swim too fast in making his crossing. He cut a chunky bush with his knife, and fastened the waterproof bag containing his weapons to his left shoulder so he could use his arms without being hampered.

"Here goes," he murmured. By this time Irvine must be up on the east road, and Sea Lion Gaines would be lurking near, ready for the signal.

When the sentinel at his end of the sawmill turned his back again to walk his beat, the Ranger entered the shallows. He held the bush he had cut before him and, keeping low, breasted into the river.

Soon the current picked him up and he swam with his legs and free arm, on his side. The bag floated beside his head, and the bush hid him as he kept it between himself and the east bank. Passing the center of the river, he let the current move him along. If a pacing guard noticed the bush it was unlikely that the gunhand would think anything of it, for there were many such passing by on the surface.

THE bulking mill cast a dense shadow over the wheel and Hatfield floated safely by the picket lines where the mustangs stamped and snorted softly. He had calculated well and needed only to make a few kicks with his powerful legs in order to gain a hold on the rock breakwater. He was hidden from anyone on the east bank when he gripped the projecting wet stone, getting his breath.

Carefully he pulled himself along the wall and around the water end until he was inside the race. He floated faster when he let go and brought up against a heavy bar which saved him from being thrown into the wheel blades. The faint splashings he made were drowned in the noises of the turning wheel, looming high over him. In the gloom it looked like some

strange monster.

Lights were above him, lanterns burning in the mill. Odors of dank wood, sawdust, and fragrant pine resin mingled in the air. A runway slanted to the water and up it logs could be drawn by men or machinery.

He gripped the edge of this slippery slide with one hand and held the precious bag with the other. The splintered planks were dry over the waterline and he lay on the cant, taking his breath. Inching on, he peered over the top and saw the floor of the raftered saw room. Big saws geared to the mainshaft helped screen him. Doc Pusey had installed two new steam-driven, high-powered cutters which glinted in the yellowish illumination.

Through a wide doorway on the land side he saw lounging outlaws, some sleeping on their blankets, others playing cards and drinking. Saddles, weapons and supplies were stacked in readiness.

He was wet but he dried his hands on the wood. When evaporation had completed the process, Hatfield opened the bag, keeping it from his damp clothing. It had held well and his weapons were in good condition. He laid his Colts before him and extracted several grenades and a box of matches.

The Ranger drew in a deep breath. The moment of decision had arrived.

CHAPTER XVI

Battle

GUARANTEE GUS STACK came into Hatfield's range of vision as the tall, bowlegged outlaw chief crossed the other room and went out an open door. Looking under the saw tables, Hatfield recognized other bandits he had encountered during the long fight around Deep River, as well as recruits who had recently arrived to join the Pusey forces. Bearded, ugly armed toughs were in possession of the mill, awaiting the following evening when Pusey planned to strike full-blast at the Double Dot I.

It was Ranger policy to offer even the worst of killers an opportunity to surrender. This often made the arresting officer's task doubly hazardous, for it gave the lawbreaker the jump, and made it imperative that the Ranger be fast enough to beat his man to the punch. Many bandits, wanted for killings anyway, preferred to shoot it out rather than be taken.

The Ranger meant to give these men a chance also, though fully realizing the danger it entailed for him.

However, Hatfield had taken every possible precaution to bring this matter to a successful conclusion. Now the battle to come would hinge on fighting ability plus that intangible ingredient sometimes called the breaks.

He raised his head.

"Throw down, outlaws!" he bellowed.

His stentorian voice echoed in the gloomy rafters of the sawmill and sent the gunslingers scrambling to their feet. Harsh warnings rang out and weapons were hastily cocked.

"Who's that?" called one of Stack's rustlers.

They were all trying to place him more exactly.

"I'm right over here, boys!" sang out the Ranger. "Drop yore arms!"

The Stack man who had challenged him gripped a double-barreled shotgun loaded with buck. He threw it up, pulled trigger, and metal slugs spread out, whirling close over Hatfield's dropped head. But he was lying on the slant below the floor level and the lead whistled harmlessly past.

A blasting volley followed the blast of the shotgun, the explosions roaring in the mill. Guarantee Gus Stack rushed back to the door through which he had exited, swearing a blue streak as he heard the alarm.

Hatfield scratched a match. It fizzled, and for a tense moment he feared they might all be too damp for use, but the next caught hold. He touched it to the short gray fuse of a grenade. When it was well started he hurled the can at the doorway. He aimed so it would fall short of the crowded outer room. Perhaps many of the hired gunmen would surrender when they found how he was armed.

The grenade landed and rolled a few feet before exploding. A blinding sheet of flame and a *whoosh* of disturbed air were followed by rising dust and smoke. Shrieks of startled, shocked gunhands joined the confusion.

"Next one lands in yore midst!" warned Hatfield, another bomb ready.

Guarantee Gus Stack was yelling at his men. He was far enough from the center of the blast so that he had not been stunned.

"Fight! There he is, right over there! Get him!" Stack was opening up with his own Colt.

Hatfield wanted to keep them busy for a few minutes. This would give Colonel Irvine a chance to rush in and surround the mill. The sentinels would certainly be startled enough so that they would hurry to the building to see what was happening, and that would help Irvine in his charge.

Outlaws near the wide doorway from the saw room had been stunned, several knocked off their feet by the first grenade. But others to the sides and at the far wall of the mill were still full of fight. Guarantee Gus was rallying them.

Bullets kicked into the wood, hunting the Ranger. He could not look over the top of the slide, for slugs were too thick there. Heavy feet thudded and he guessed they were coming at him, seeking to catch him in a rush.

He lighted another fused can and lobbed it into the air without showing himself to his foes.

Hugging the boards, Hatfield felt the force of the second grenade. The blasting light and deafening roar came again.

It checked the charge. Reddish flames were licking up a dry partition as the unpainted, weathered wood caught, ignited by the searing heat of the explosion.

"Fire! Fire!" screeched a panicked bandit.

REBEL yells floated in, with the thunder of galloping horses. Shouts and gunshots rose outside. Outlaws trying to get out found themselves framed against the glow, targets for Irvine's riders who came spurring up to circle the sawmill.

All the fight had left the main crew of bandits, caught in the building by the Ranger. The two grenades had stunned many, and confused outlaws were dropping their guns, staggering about or lying on the floor, shaking.

Colts up, Hatfield scrambled over the top of the slide. He could feel the heat from the burning wall as the flames licked upward. Guarantee Gus Stack suddenly rose before him, pistol gripped in hand. He had been blown across the saw room, and his face was smudged from contact with the dirty floor. His eyes were bloodshot and wild as he braced his feet to make his fight.

He recognized the tall figure before him.

"Hold it, Gus!" called the Ranger.

Guarantee Gus was mouthing curses in a voice shrill with panic.

"I savvy you! Guarantee I'll blast yore hide loose!"

Hatfield had to shoot. Stack was partially stunned, but dangerous as a wounded panther. The outlaw leader's pistol banged, but the Ranger had lifted his thumb off his hammer spur a breath sooner. Stack was staggering when he fired, and his bullet whirled low past Hatfield.

Guarantee Gus went down, the dancing flames from the burning wall lighting him.

The uproar outside was growing. Frightened, subdued gunhands trapped between the fire and Irvine's guns, were bleating for mercy.

Guarantee Gus Stack was finished. Hatfield saw that, even as the scorching breath of the fire drove him back. There was a small exit at the north end of the saw room and he made for it, crouched there and looked out at the scene.

Irvine, Horseface Tate, Eg Burley, Vern Nolan and their cowboys were taking prisoners as fast as the surrendering bandits came out. On the west bank of Deep River, a few flashes of carbines told the Ranger that Sea Lion Gaines and his boys were over there on the job. A dozen of Stack's men, who had been outside, had taken to the water to escape when they had been cut off from their horses by Irvine's rapidly moving attacking force.

So fast had been the demoralization and breakup of Stack's powerful band that it was about finished at the sawmill when Hatfield stepped out to help clean up. He signaled and called to Jake Irvine, who spurted to his side.

Irvine was grinning with delight. "We done it, Ranger! They're smashed."

"Watch the town," warned Hatfield. "Pusey's up there, and he's got a bunch of lumberjacks and his bodyguard."

Already yells were coming from Sandtown as the battle din warned Pusey's

bunch of danger. Against the town's lights the battling ranchers saw Doc Pusey and a crowd of armed men rushing for the sawmill.

"Leave a skeleton crew to guard these cusses and let's try to round up Pusey's force," ordered the Ranger.

He gave shrill whistles, signals which would bring the golden sorrel to him. Goldy appeared on the west bank, took to the water, and swam across, wading the shallows below the mill.

By the time Hatfield had mounted and ridden around the land side of the sawmill, Irvine and a pack of hard-riding, yelling cowboys had locked horns with the lumberjacks. The jacks had made a strategic error by running into the open on foot, but they had had no way of knowing that Stack's strong band was already smashed.

Guns were flashing, fighting men howling defiance, as the Ranger drove into the center of the fray.

IT WAS nip and tuck for a few minutes as the harried lumberjacks and toughs imported by Doc Pusey from Fort Worth sought to make a stand in a little clearing near the river bank. The cowboys stabbed in and out, pouring lead at the enemy.

Sea Lion Gaines and his half-dozen waddies, having snaffled some outlaws who had managed to cross Deep River, pushed their horses into the stream and crossed to join in the battle. They surged up the bank and jumped into the scrap.

But with Guarantee Gus Stack's crew out of the picture Pusey's outlaws, caught in the open, had no chance. One dropped his gun, and as though that was a signal, a couple more did the same, throwing themselves flat on the ground in token of surrender. Bunches quit as Irvine and the Ranger pressed in and began disarming them, assisted by Deep River cowboys and ranchers.

"Where's Doc Pusey?" asked Hatfield. "I ain't seen him since the start of this fight."

Colonel Irvine shook his head. Pusey was not among the captives, and they did not see him in the plaza where citizens had gathered to watch the struggle.

"I shore need to overtake that sidewinder," the Ranger told the Colonel. "He can start all over again if he gets clear."

Pusey must have guessed that Stack had failed. But he had started his own bunch into the thick of it to hold up the rancher party. Even now he might be flogging his way to the Fort Worth stronghold.

Hatfield cleaned himself up a bit and put on his Stetson, boots and cartridge belts. He borrowed the "makin's" from Sea Lion Gaines and lit up.

The sawmill fire had caught hold and one wing was enveloped in roaring flames. As the bullets quit flying, men hustled from the settlement with buckets to keep it from spreading, for the building was tinderlike and could not be saved.

CHAPTER XVII

Report

CIGARETTE dangling from his wide mouth, the damp Ranger rode the golden sorrel to the center of Sandtown, grit stinging his cheeks. Lights were on in the Wolf and other late spots, but most of the drinkers had gone to the fire.

He slid off his horse and stalked into the saloon, Colts riding in their holsters. He had not seen Buck Robertson and was worried about his young friend.

Doc Pusey was not in the bar and the tenders on duty said they had not seen him since he had rushed out. Hatfield went up the stairs two at a time and swung toward Hair-oil Thad Carr's room.

The door was shut. Hatfield stood to one side, kicked up the latch and the door flew open. Gun up, he looked into the room.

"Halt or I'll fire!" a sharp voice ordered, Buck Robertson's voice.

"Buck!" cried the Ranger.

"Jim! Come in! I got Hair-oil Carr!"

Hatfield stepped inside. Carr lay on the bunk, shaking in alarm, under Buck's drawn gun.

"Good work, Buck! I see yuh held him. Where's Doc Pusey?"

"He went runnin' out when the shootin' started," replied Buck. "Carr was in no hurry to get in the fight and I checked him before he went downstairs. Figgered yuh'd be along if yuh could make it."

Hair-oil Carr's nerve had cracked. Hatfield loomed over him, scowling down at the trembling salesman.

"Where's Pusey gone?" he growled.

"I—dunno!" chattered Carr. The veneer had cracked, and was gone, along with his superior, sneering manner. He was scared to the point of tears. "It was all Pusey's fault, Ranger! So help me!" His blinking, watering eyes were riveted to the silver star on silver circle which Hatfield had pinned to his shirt. "I'll tell you everything. You can send Pusey to jail for twenty years if the fool don't hang!"

"Fine," said Hatfield drily. "Keep an eye on him, Buck. I'm goin' after Pusey."

The lumber king must have fled Sandtown. Fort Worth would be the spot he would make for. It was a long, tough run, but Hatfield intended to make it.

As he rode south along the east rim of the plaza, back toward the burning sawmill to find Colonel Irvine and tell the rancher leader he was on his way to Fort Worth, a town lad hailed him.

"Say, Ranger! Someone's yellin' his head off at the telegraph office!"

"Thanks, son. I'll see about it."

Dismounting, and hearing the calls from inside the office, Hatfield opened the door and entered. The room was dark. He struck a match and as it flared up could see the Sandtown agent tied in an armchair before the shelf on which stood his sending and receiving instruments. A candle in its stick stood on the table. Hatfield lit it.

There had been a bandanna gag on the agent's lips but he had managed to rub it down.

"That feller they call Doc Pusey come here a while ago!" the agent said excitedly. "Made me send that message to Austin for him! He said he savvied Morse code, so I didn't dare try to trick him for he had a gun on me. He left me tied up and gagged and rode off."

Hatfield scanned the message hastily scrawled out by Pusey and sent over the wires under the gun.

The order to Pusey's chief confederate in Austin read:

GET ALL DETAILS AT ONCE PERSONAL AND OFFICIAL ON RANGER JAMES HATFIELD. IF HOSTAGES AVAILBLE SEIZE THEM AND HOLD. PUSEY

"Wire the capital and see can yuh stop delivery," commanded Hatfield.

He was losing precious time. Each instant took Doc Pusey farther away. After what seemed an interminable wait the Austin operator replied, and the ticking key told them that the rush wire had already been sent out.

If they discovered Anita Robertson they might kidnap her, hold her as Pusey had ordered!

"Get this off to Captain William McDowell, Ranger Headquarters, Austin," said Hatfield. He wrote a warning to his chief.

IT WAS vital now to stop Doc Pusey. Hatfield lost no time in finding Colonel Irvine, and told him he was moving out. Then he galloped out of Sandtown on the powerful golden sorrel.

The world was gray with the touch of the new dawn as Hatfield pushed inexorably northward on the Fort Worth pike. He could sense the fresh dust in the cool air and, as the light grew better could see it.

He galloped around a wide turn and ahead sighted the dark figure of a horseman.

"That's him," he muttered. "Let's have it all, Goldy!"

With magnificent stamina the sorrel put on a final burst of speed which picked up more and more yards between the officer and his prey.

Pusey glanced back, and instantly knew who was after him. He was still miles from his Fort Worth haven, and alone, having thrown all his comrades to the winds in his effort to save himself. He turned in his saddle to fire at his foe, and the bullet whistled in the air over the slogging Ranger.

Hatfield kept coming, Colt in hand as he neared Pusey.

The lumber king was riding a long-legged, strong black animal but, good as the horse was, he could not match the golden sorrel. Foam showed on his flanks and there were bloody spur gouges where Pusey had raked him as he called for more speed. Pusey's quirt, the loop around his left wrist, kept beating a tattoo on the black.

"Pull up, Pusey!" roared Hatfield.

But the man refused to stop. Off to the

left loomed a patch of woods and Pusey, realizing he was soon to be overtaken, ripped his rein and veered for it, hoping to reach the trees and gain cover from which he could make his kill.

Hatfield swung with him, picking up a few more yards in the dash. The black hit a soft spot and stumbled, slowed, but caught himself and kept on. Pusey was jolted but settled himself and tried again for Hatfield.

The Ranger took aim. Firing from a moving horse was not usually accurate but he was trained to it and had a flair for such marksmanship. He sent a warning shot first, and Pusey's hat flipped off his head, its chinstrap snapping at the strain as the heavy slug passed through the crown.

Pusey screamed and flung himself from saddle. He gripped his pistol as he turned with a snarl to face the Ranger. There was no doubt he meant to kill if he could. Hatfield let go a second time. Pusey's last shot drove into the sandy earth, flicking up shale. It missed the sorrel's legs and Pusey, catching lead himself, staggered, and his arm dropped.

The lumber king sagged and crumpled to the ground as Hatfield whirled up and dismounted, standing over him as he died.

* * * * *

A hot sun burned down on Austin as Hatfield and Buck Robertson finished the last block to the little cottage on the east side of the capital. They could hear gunfire and as they galloped up, saw men around Anita's home, crouched behind fences or adjoining buildings.

Blasts came from windows, holding them down, and when they saw the tall man on the sorrel, with young Buck gripping his carbine, the attackers sprang up and ran. They had horses waiting and jumped to leather, spurring off down the road.

Captain Bill McDowell flung open the front door. The old Ranger chief grinned broadly.

"Howdy, Hatfield! I got yore wire. Been on guard here ever since. They didn't count on me, I reckon."

ANITA was safe and sound, and McDowell had brought with him his office aide, another old man who had once served with the Rangers. The two had held the fort against the gunslingers sent by the dead Pusey's orders to seize Anita.

There was a glad reunion as Anita hugged Buck and smiled at the tall Ranger. She cooked dinner for them and after eating, McDowell and Hatfield smoked together in the parlor, while the officer made his report on Deep River.

"The range is safe, Cap'n. How yuh makin' out against Pusey's timber lobby?"

"Great!" replied McDowell. "And with Pusey done in it will collapse. Yuh done a fine job, Hatfield. . . ."

Next morning Jim Hatfield, spick and span and rested from his long run, reported at headquarters. McDowell was on hand as usual. The old Captain was an early riser, up with the birds and just as chipper.

"Always plenty of work for a Ranger," he muttered, rattling a sheaf of reports.

Hatfield knew what he meant, and was ready to go. When he had received his orders and information, he mounted the golden sorrel and started off on another perilous mission, and with him rode the strong arm of Lone Star State law.

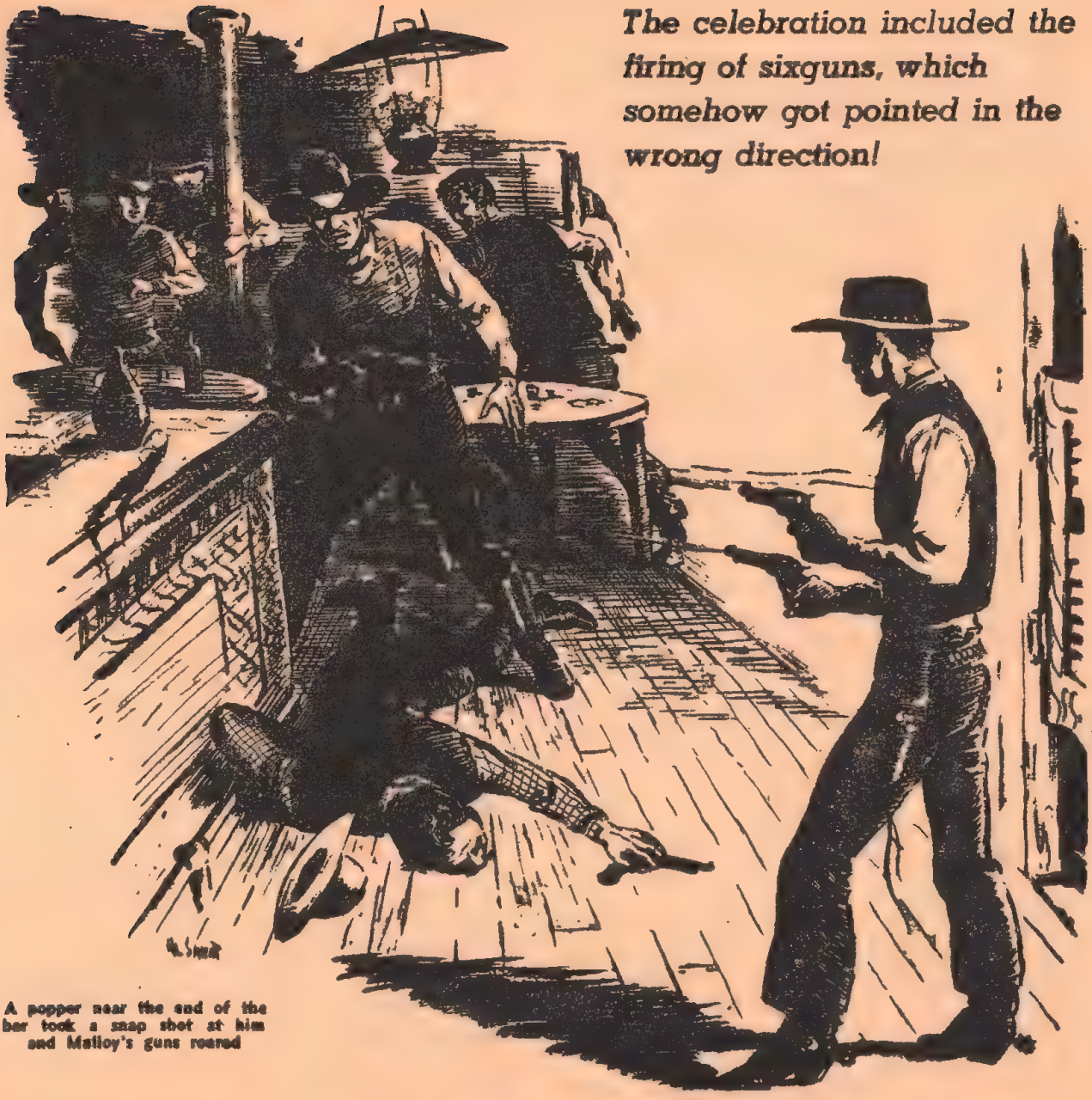
JIM HATFIELD BATTLES FOR PROGRESS WHEN THE RAILROADS INVADE A POWERFUL CATTLE EMPIRE IN

SLICK IRONS AT BIG BOWL CANYON

By JACKSON COLE

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING COMPLETE TEXAS RANGER NOVEL

The celebration included the firing of sixguns, which somehow got pointed in the wrong direction!



A popper near the end of the bar took a snap shot at him and Malloy's guns roared

Ranger's Happy New Year

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

WHERE the trail ran beside the roadbed of the new railway and was fairly level, Ranger Pat Malloy sagged comfortably in his saddle and let his pony lope toward the declining sun.

He had been riding since dawn, steadily except for a few stops to give his pony a breathing spell. Much of the trail to Copper City—nicknamed "Border Hell" by men who knew its citizenry—was so rough that a steady hand on the reins was imperative.

This, the last day of the calendar year, was hot down in the Border country. Malloy wiped his face with his neckcloth, made a cigarette, lighted the smoke. Through narrowed eyes he viewed the

rails shining in the sun and the line of telegraph poles that paralleled them.

This railway line had been built to tap the district around Copper City, where a wealth of copper ore had been discovered. For the time being the rich ore was being shipped to the nearest smelters.

Copper City, as Malloy knew, made other Border mining camps look like kindergartens. The miners were of mixed races that seemed unable to get along with one another; many were fugitives from the Law. And the place also attracted brush-poppers—criminals who jumped from one side of the Line to the other when capture threatened.

Malloy's professional interest was the result of being sent to Copper City several times to prevent riots and destruction of property. His personal interest stemmed from his first visit, when he had met Lola Wheeler, the pretty, motherless daughter of Jim Wheeler, the railway station agent.

Malloy saw in Lola the woman he wanted to marry. Lola saw a tall, slender, bronze-faced man of thirty who had a tantalizing smile—and decided he would be all right as a husband.

They met about once a month, when Malloy's routine patrol took him to Copper City. But at times emergency duty upset his schedule. It had done so on Christmas, when he had been compelled to send Lola's present by a friend—he had been riding with a posse in pursuit of a murderer. But he had sent her word that he would surely be there to help celebrate New Year's Day.

Jim Wheeler had declared there would be no marriage with his consent while Malloy was a Ranger, not wishing his daughter to become a widow almost any moment. Malloy, therefore, had decided to resign from the service, marry Lola and settle down. Ed Catlin, manager of the copper-mining company, had arranged to put Malloy on the payroll as soon as his term of service was up.

The trail swung away from the railroad to follow the rim of a twisting arroyo. Malloy had to ride down into the arroyo and along its dusty floor for a distance before he could get out of it again.

He judged he would reach Copper City about sunset, which was not far off. He finally topped a hill and saw the cluster of mud huts and ramshackle buildings that made up the village. As he rode on, he straightened in his saddle and became more alert.

It would be a wild New Year's Eve. The drinking establishments would keep open all night, and so would the mining company's store, operated by Tom Dell. Malloy hoped he would not be called on to exercise his authority. Everybody would be wearing a gun, which made for danger, for a drunk with a gun was a bad thing.

It was customary for men to empty their guns into the air on the stroke of midnight to welcome in the new year. Since no clock in the town struck the hour, they depended on the watch of Pedro Lopez, who owned the principal *cantina*.

MALLOY rode along the railway line to the little depot. Jim Wheeler and Lola had living quarters attached to the station, and the door opened when Malloy was dismounting and Lola came running to meet him.

"Oh, Pat, I'm so glad you made it!" Lola said, as they walked arm in arm toward the door.

"Sorry I couldn't get here for Christmas," he told her.

"Anyhow, you're here now, and I'm so glad!" She squeezed his arm. "I've planned a nice New Year's dinner for tomorrow."

As they went into the kitchen and Malloy gulped hot coffee, he noticed that she looked worried. Jim Wheeler opened the door which connected the depot office with the living quarters, and greeted the Ranger.

"I'll put my pony in your corral," Malloy said.

"I'll step along with you," Wheeler replied. "Listen for the telegraph sounder, Lola. I'll leave the door open."

Wheeler walked with Malloy down the platform to get the pony. They led the pony to the corral, and Malloy and Wheeler talked of ordinary things as Malloy unsaddled the buckskin and turned in.

"What you lookin' so glum about?" Malloy suddenly asked the station agent.

"I don't like trouble, and we always have it here. Bart French has been in town for several days."

Malloy's face became serious. "He been actin' up?"

"He's been doin' a lot of talkin'. He's a

born troublemaker! That's why Catlin kicked him off the minin' company's land. He's been away for more'n a month. It's bein' hinted he was on the other side of the Line, and that he's thrown in with the brush-poppers and started smugglin'."

"I'll have to look into that."

"He's been makin' threats ag'in Catlin, said he aims to get square with him. Said he'd have plenty of brush-popper friends to help him."

"Any poppers in town yet?"

"They've been comin' in since yesterday noon. Their ponies line the hitch rails. Could be only the New Year's Eve spree, and it could be more."

"I'll have to take a squint around," Malloy decided.

"There's somethin' more, Pat. When Bart French was singin' his threats, somebody said he'd better behave 'cause the Ranger might be in town for New Year's. French said he'd like nothin' better than to tangle with you when his friends were here. You jailed him two years ago when they had the miners' riot."

"That makes it personal! I'll look up Bart French and have a little talk with him."

"Be careful, Pat. They may try to trap you. There's sure to be trouble tonight. There's always been bad blood 'tween the miners and the brush-poppers."

"A Ranger oughta be able to take care of himself," Malloy said. "Let's go inside and eat supper, then I'll stroll uptown."

Lola smiled at them as they entered. She dished up supper, her face rosy as she worked over the hot stove. When they had finished eating, Malloy stood up and reached for his hat.

"I'll drift around some," he said.

Lola followed him outside and clung to his arm. "Please be careful, Pat," she begged.

Malloy strode off the platform. But when he reached the end and was ready to start up the street, he stopped to take his gun of leather and inspect it. Satisfied, he started for the end of the group of business buildings a hundred yards away.

A full moon was up, but streaks of shadow were cast by the buildings. The saloons and stores blazed with light. Men were hurrying in and out of the buildings. Raucous song came from Lopez's saloon.

Standing in a spot of darkness, Malloy inspected the scene. Light from the open doors revealed faces of passers-by. The Ranger recognized several brush-poppers against whom, at present there were no outstanding warrants.

HE went into the company store. Tom Dell, the manager, was short and fat and bald, and there was very little his keen eyes missed. A few customers were in the store, and Dell was behind the counter with a clerk. Malloy's presence seemed to make some of the customers nervous, and they drifted out.

"May be trouble tonight," Dell whispered to Malloy when they could get alone. "Bart French is in town. A lot of poppers here, too. French has been makin' loud talk—says he aims to get rid of Ed Catlin, that Ed acts like the mine company owns the earth! And he also made threats against a certain Ranger—which is you!"

"Thanks, Tom," Malloy said. "What about Pedro Lopez?"

"He and the other two saloon men don't want trouble. They're on the side of the Law. They're hopin to get through the night without everything bein' smashed."

Malloy left the store and passed through the shadows, watching and listening. He overheard two brush-poppers talking.

"Bart's got everything planned," one said. "It can be pulled off easy on New Year's Eve. Fine chance to get Ed Catlin—by accident. And the Ranger got to town. We'd all like to get him, huh? New Year's Eve, with the usual stunt, is just the right time. Couldn't do it any other time 'thout runnin' a risk."

Malloy walked on, wondering at what he had heard. Ed Catlin, the mine manager, had a cottage on the hillside. He was a bachelor and lived alone. An Indian squaw cooked for him and kept the place clean.

When Malloy got to the cottage, Catlin had finished the evening meal and the squaw was cleaning up in the kitchen. Catlin greeted Malloy cordially and set out bottle and glasses.

"I've had hints there may be trouble tonight," Catlin said, after they had settled down with drinks and smokes.

"So have I." Malloy told him all he had learned. "Best thing is for you to stay

home and keep out of the trouble zone. I'll drop in at midnight, and we can take a drink together—"

"Can't be done, Pat," Catlin interrupted. "It's a company custom for me to buy drinks in the company's name for everybody in sight on New Year's Eve. I've always done it, Pat, and I can't play coward and fail to do it tonight."

"I know how you feel, Ed. But just this once—"

Catlin shook his head. "If I didn't show up, they'd think I was afraid. I'd lose prestige with the company men. They wouldn't work for me."

"But if there's danger—"

"Are you, for instance, goin' to hide?"

Pat grinned. "I reckon not. But I'm a lawman on duty."

"And I'm on duty, in a way. I'm the copper company's man here. You want the company officials to admit they used bad judgment when they put me here?"

"Certainly not, Ed!"

"There it is! So I'm goin' to buy drinks in the company's name tonight as is usual on New Year's Eve."

MALLOY jumped up. "I've got it!" he exclaimed. "That's what they meant! They can do it New Year's Eve without runnin' much risk—"

"What are you talkin' about, Pat?"

"At midnight, they empty their guns into the air and yell, don't they? Suppose some man doesn't aim at the sky tonight but shoots straight—on purpose. They'll all be yellin'. When they quiet down, somebody will find a man who's been shot by a stray bullet, and they'll say it was an accident. Nobody'll know who fired the shot—nobody who'll tell."

Catlin's bronzed face turned ashen. He paced around the room and finally stopped in front of Malloy.

"I'll buy that round of drinks as usual Pat," he declared.

"Buckle on a gun, then. And watch where you stand when the shootin' starts. Get your back to a wall. I'll try to be near. Don't show up too early. I'll go down to the village now."

Malloy headed for the nearest of the saloons. He nodded to the proprietor and the customers, talked a little, and went outside. Most of the men in the place had been brush-poppers and Malloy had watched them closely. They seemed nervous, acted like men who knew something was going to happen.

He visited the second saloon and found the same condition. In this place were brush-poppers and miners both. And from their talk Malloy knew that, after a lot of drinking, the two groups would be ready to jump each other.

Going between two buildings, Malloy approached Pedro Lopez's *cantina* from the rear, looked in through a dirt-streaked window. The place was thronged. Mining men and brush-poppers jostled one another and glared, but none was ripe yet to pass the fighting word. Malloy hitched up his gun belt and strode inside. He had spotted Bart French standing at the middle of the barroom.

French was a giant of a man, with huge biceps, and he fancied his strength. His face was whiskered. His talk and manner revealed he had been drinking heavily. A gun swung in a holster at his hip.

The Ranger started along the bar slowly, thrusting through the crowd. Men were suddenly quiet as they drew back out of his path. He went slowly toward where Bart French was standing.

The sudden quiet, the stealthy movement of men near him attracted French's attention. He glanced into the back mirror of the bar and saw the Ranger. He turned slowly, eyes ablaze, his hands on the bar, one clutching a whisky glass.

"Howdy, French!" Malloy greeted.

"Howdy, Ranger," French muttered.

"Bart, remember the riot we had two years ago?"

"I remember. You had me sent to jail for thirty days. I ain't forgettin' it!"

"I was hopin' so, Bart. You ain't the kind who can stand to be jailed. Thirty days was more'n enough for you. Think what it would mean to be in jail for a long term—maybe years."

"What's all this talk? We're here to celebrate New Year's Eve!"

"Sure, Bart—we all want to celebrate. But let's do it decent and right. Remember that after the riot the minin' company built a strong little 'dobe jail here in Copper City? Hasn't been used much, but it's always ready. And I've got a key to it, Bart. Just behave yourself tonight!"

Bart French's eyes blazed again, and he was breathing heavily, trying to choke

back his rage. Malloy eyed him, swung around him, went on through the crowd and out into the street.

IT WAS nearing midnight, the hour of possible trouble. Malloy stood in a dark spot until he saw Ed Catlin come down the path and start toward the first saloon. Malloy followed, but kept out of Catlin's sight.

Catlin entered the nearest saloon and stood at the head of the bar beckoning the proprietor.

"Everybody have a New Year's drink on the minin' company!" Catlin invited. He gestured to the man behind the bar. "Put out bottles and glasses and let me know the score."

Miners hurried forward, cheering Catlin. But the brush-poppers kept back.

"We can buy our own drinks!" some man shouted.

Catlin did not reply. Drinks were poured and he drank with the others, then went to the door. He passed within fifteen feet of Malloy, waiting outside, without noticing him.

In the second saloon, almost the same scene was enacted. Malloy met Catlin as he emerged.

"Why don't you give it up, Ed?" the Ranger asked.

"Company's orders, Pat." Catlin's face was grim, and a glint was in his eyes. "I'll go to Pedro Lopez's place now and see what happens."

"After that, Ed, why not go to the store and join Tom Dell? That might be safest."

Catlin nodded, and crossed the street to enter Lopez's place. Malloy hurried around the building and got to the rear door to watch. He saw Catlin stride to the head of the bar and beckon Lopez, who nodded at what the mine manager told him. Lopez went back to the middle of the bar and yelled for attention.

"As usual, men, the mining company is buying a round to wash in the new year," Catlin shouted. "Up to the bar, everybody!"

A burst of cheers answered him, and miners crowded to the bar. The brush-poppers held back when Bart French gestured for them to do so.

"We don't need minin'-company liquor!" French yelled.

Catlin didn't answer. He lifted his glass and saluted the miners, and they drank. Catlin stood there and rolled a cigarette, looked the crowd over, smiled slightly at French as though with pity, and turned to walk from the place.

Malloy got through the rear door and hurried around to the front to watch Catlin cross the street and go into the store. The Ranger hurried over there himself. Only a couple of old townsmen were in the store in addition to Dell, Catlin and two clerks.

"I don't like this, Ed," Malloy told Catlin. "Any other time, French and the brush-poppers might have jumped you over in Lopez's saloon. That they didn't shows they've got their plans made and right now French is holdin' the poppers back."

"What I'm afraid of is a ruckus 'tween the miners and the poppers," Dell put in. "It's fifteen minutes till midnight."

"Stay under cover, Ed," the Ranger said to Catlin. "Don't cross the street. If you want to watch the fun go out in front of the store, but don't mix in the crowd."

Malloy recrossed the street without being seen, stopped on the dark side of Lopez's place close to the front, and waited.

Miners and brush-poppers were reeling out into the street already, shouting at one another. Malloy saw a man glance through a window of the store and then cross back to Lopez's place. Bart French was standing just inside the door, and Malloy heard what the spy reported to him:

"He's in the store talkin' to Tom Dell, Bart."

Malloy saw French nod. The Ranger was tense as he waited. If Bart French made a move toward Catlin, Malloy wanted to prevent a tragedy. He also felt it his duty to try to prevent a serious clash between the miners and the brush-poppers.

Men spewed suddenly out of Lopez's saloon, and Lopez himself came in the door with his watch in his hand. The few in the store emerged to stand in front of it close to the door. Streaks of light came through the door and windows to reveal them.

Malloy felt like shouting to Catlin to stand back out of the light. But that

would call attention to the mine manager, and also Catlin might resent it. Malloy guessed that French had decided to make the attempt himself by way of personal revenge. And he was wondering how Catlin felt. It took courage to stand there like that.

Malloy saw Lopez lift his watch and look at it, and then lift his right hand as if to give a signal. Malloy did not see Bart French, who was still standing just inside the saloon door. Malloy got his service gun out of its holster and held it ready.

Lopez dropped his hand. "Midnight!" he yelled.

Guns began flaming and men in the street began yelling. Flashes of flame split the night and a few bullets thudded into the buildings.

Crouching at the corner of the saloon building, Malloy was trying to watch everything at once. He saw Tom Dell duck his head suddenly and guessed a wild bullet had struck the store.

Then Malloy saw Bart French reel out of the saloon. He raised his gun and howled and shot twice into the air. Malloy continued watching closely; he could do nothing until French made a wrong move.

Bart French made it. He turned slightly and dropped the muzzle of his gun for the third shot. Even as Malloy sprang forward, French's weapon belched flame and lead. The Ranger looked across the street and saw Ed Catlin fall, saw Tom Dell making wild gestures.

French whirled around as Malloy charged with his heavy service weapon uplifted. French's shot was wild, the bullet brushing the Ranger's left sleeve. Then Malloy was slashing with his own gun instead of shooting, pistol-whipping. He sent French reeling backward, knocked his gun from his hand, sent him crashing to the ground with a final blow.

Some of the brush-poppers were charging forward. Malloy stooped and got Bart French's weapon. Malloy fired over the brush-poppers' heads and they scattered.

His own gun and French's empty, Malloy darted around the corner of the building to reload swiftly.

He heard loud cries and boots pounding as the brush-poppers came on again. He could hear them charging into Lopez's place and rushing through it as if to cut off his escape from the rear. His guns ready again, the Ranger slipped through the shadows to the front of the building.

Bart French was no longer stretched on the ground, and Malloy guessed his friends had carried him inside the saloon. Across the street, Dell and the town doctor were carrying Ed Catlin into the store. Some of the miners were hurrying in that direction, and one man was yelling that Catlin had been shot by the brush-poppers.

There always had been bad blood between the miners and poppers, Malloy knew. Many of the miners disliked Catlin, as any boss is disliked by some of his men; but they would gang together to attack any gang who attacked him. That was a matter of loyalty.

A bullet came from somewhere and brushed Malloy's hat from his head. The firing had died down. The celebrants had exploded their first enthusiasm. Now there was danger of a war between infuriated gangs.

"Get them poppers!" somebody was shouting. "They shot Catlin! Smoke 'em out!"

MALLOY slipped to the open door of Lopez's saloon, glanced in. The brush-poppers were talking, reloading weapons. Bart French had been propped up against the wall and a man was holding a glass of whisky to his lips. French seemed to be giving orders.

Another bullet came from somewhere and burned Malloy's left arm up high. The shock whirled him halfway around. He fired at a brush-popper dodging back around the corner of the building. The miners were gathering rapidly in front of the store.

"Want help, Ranger?" one of them yelled at Malloy.

"Don't start a riot," he called back. "I'll handle this! I know who shot Catlin."

"Name him!" several men shouted.

"Stay over there. Watch over Catlin," Malloy called. "Is he alive?"

"Doc says he's bad shot, but will live."

Malloy was thankful for that, and hoped the information was correct. He was blaming himself for not saving Catlin, yet he knew he had not had time to do so.

With a gun held in either hand, Malloy

approached the door of the saloon again. He strode through the entrance and stepped quickly to one side.

"Out of here, or I shoot!" he yelled at the brush-poppers. "Bart French is my prisoner. Out! The miners are gettin' ready to come at you. They'll blast you off the earth 'cause French shot Catlin! Some of you were in the deal with him. You may swing for it—"

They had listened to him in silence, glancing at him, at Bart French as if for orders. French was bracing himself up against the wall. He had recovered rapidly from the pistol-whipping Malloy had given him.

The Ranger lifted his guns and swung them before his body. "Out!" he ordered again.

A popper near the end of the bar took a snap shot at him. Malloy's guns roared. The man who had fired at him sprawled. The hat flew from the head of another popper. More of them fired as some started charging toward the door to get out.

Malloy felt a blow in his left hip and knew he had been hit. His guns blazed again and two more poppers went down, one to sprawl lifelessly, the other to crawl toward the door, where friends seized him and carried him out.

Through the swirls of gunsmoke Malloy saw men rush out into the street. Wild yells came from the miners as the brush-poppers emerged. Guns began cracking. From the sounds, Malloy could tell that the brush-poppers were rushing to their ponies.

Malloy's hip gave way and he slumped to the floor against the wall opposite Bart French. He saw that someone had left a gun with French and now he was starting to lift it, his eyes ablaze with hate as he looked at Malloy.

Their guns spoke almost at the same instant, but the Ranger's shot had been fired first. As French's bullet chipped adobe within inches of Malloy's head, French dropped his gun and toppled over. Despite the haste of his firing, Malloy had placed that shot: he knew French had been wounded in the right shoulder and that the shock of the striking bullet, plus the pistol-whipping he had received, had bowled him over.

BOOTS pounded and some of the miners rushed into the place with Lopez, who had departed through the rear door and circled the building during the firing. Malloy yelled at them:

"Don't touch Bart French! I've handled him! What's happened?"

"Brush-poppers hit their saddles and rode after we'd got three of 'em," a miner answered. "Doc says Catlin will live. You bad hurt, Ranger?"

"Only a hip wound—nothin' serious. Get Doc here soon as you can to patch up French. The jail's yawnin' for him."

Most of the miners hurried outdoors again. Pedro Lopez took Malloy a glass of whisky and the Ranger gulped some. More men came in from the street, mostly townsmen, and Jim Wheeler was with them.

"I'm all right," Malloy told him. "Doc can patch me up. This'll get me leave of absence for a few days, and I can spend the time with Lola. Will you fix me a cot in the baggage room, Jim? Got to rest up a bit so's I can do justice to Lola's New Year's dinner tomorrow."

"How about French?" Wheeler asked.

"I'll deputize Lopez and a coupla others, includin' Tom Dell, and they can put him in jail and guard him till the sheriff gets here. You wire him, Jim, and give him the particulars. How about the men in the street?"

"None dead," Wheeler reported. "Some hurt. They'll be guarded till the sheriff comes."

Wheeler hurried away to wire the sheriff and tell Lola that Malloy was all right, as far as serious injury went. The town doctor appeared and, at Malloy's order, began working on Bart French first. Lopez was deputized, and two other men.

Then, propped up in a chair, the Ranger made a cigarette with some difficulty, lighted it, and waited for the doctor to get around to him. Just another incident to go on his service record.

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"THE CITY OF SILVER," a Smashing Book-Length Novel of the Comstock Lode by Leslie Scott, featured in January WEST—Now on Sale, 20c at all Stands!

The CANYON RIDERS

an action novelet by BRADFORD SCOTT

"Up!" roared the sheriff, and the double click of his gun hammers emphasized the command

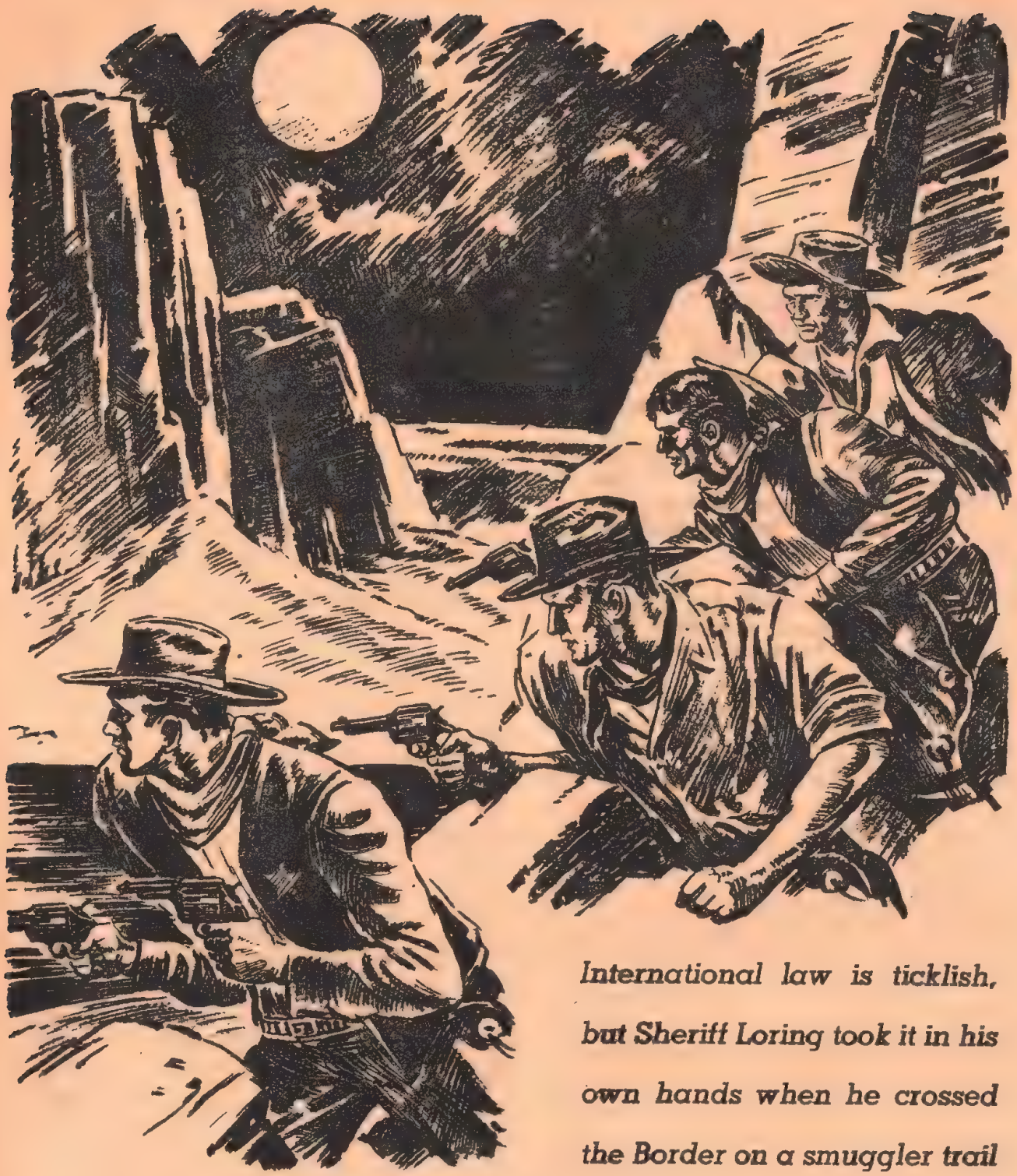
CHAPTER I

Trouble in the Canyon

FRANCE LORING, Sheriff of Brewster County, pulled his big blue moros to a halt on the crest of a rise and gazed toward where the tawny flood of the Rio Grande rolled toward the dark mouth of the Grand Canyon of Santa Helena. The River of the Palms was on a rampage and was decidedly *not* "a mile wide and a foot deep, too thick to drink and too thin to plow!"

"Horse, either I'm seein' things that aren't, or somebody is plain loco!" the sheriff muttered.

But it was not the swirling yellow



International law is ticklish, but Sheriff Loring took it in his own hands when he crossed the Border on a smuggler trail

water that held Loring's attention. It was an object that dipped and bobbed on its surface.

"For the love of Pete!" the astounded sheriff swore aloud. "Do those jiggers aim to go into the canyon?"

The men handling the sweeps of the big flat-bottomed boat were *not,* apparently, striving to reach either shore. They were holding the craft to the channel, and heading straight for the mouth of the canyon.

In addition to the four men handling the sweeps, Loring could make out some six or seven more crouched in the boat.

But what interested the sheriff more was that the boat undoubtedly carried cargo other than her human freight. She was low in the water from the weight of something—he could not at that distance define it—that was heaped in a mound that barely allowed the oarsmen space to operate.

Loring's hand tightened on the bridle, but he immediately relaxed again. He could not hope to reach the river bank before the craft would vanish between the canyon walls. Also, he had a decided feeling that his intrusion would not be welcome, and he would provide a very nice target as he rode over the ridges, clearly outlined against the sky.

In addition to the other hazards, there was a rather nice question of international law involved, the Rio Grande being the "Line" between the United States and Mexico.

"But just the same, I'd sure like to get a close look at that stuff they're packin'," the sheriff muttered, straining his eyes toward the objects in question, which appeared to be of considerable length and wrapped in sacking of some sort.

The boat swept on, toward a cluster of small buttes and chimney rocks that flanked the towering cliff that was the right wall of the canyon mouth. The boat was almost exactly opposite this miniature badlands when from the shadow of a butte mushroomed a puff of whitish smoke. Before he heard the report of the rifle shot, the sheriff saw one of the oarsmen throw up his hands and pitch into the swirling water.

Then more puffs spurted from beneath the butte. The shots were answered by a volley from the boat. Another oarsman went down kicking and clawing on top of the cargo. The remaining two dropped their sweeps and dived behind the mound of freight. The crackling of the guns reached Loring's ears like thorns burning under a pot.

"Hit the trail, feller!" he shouted to his horse. "Sift sand!"

The great moros shot forward. But before he got into his full stride, the oarless boat hurtled past the chimney rocks and into the mouth of the canyon, spouting smoke and flame. Instantly the answering shots from the rocks ceased.

Loring was nearing the bottom of the rise, but still nearly a mile distant from the scene of battle, when half a dozen horsemen shot from the shadow of the rock. With them were two riderless horses. By the time the sheriff pulled his blowing mount to a halt at the base of the butte, they had disappeared amid the thick chaparral growth that grew up to the canyon rim.

KNOWING that pursuit was hopeless, Sheriff Loring dismounted, stood staring at two sprawled figures in the shadow of the rocks.

One of the dead men was undoubtedly a Mexican of much Indian blood. His face was blotched and bloated by dissipation and vice. He was stringy in build, almost to a state of emaciation. His companion was blocky, powerful-looking, with hard-lined features and pale-blue eyes already beginning to glaze. His hair was sandy and sparse.

"Hard to tell which is the ornerier lookin', the breed or the white hellion," grunted Loring, as he began turning out the pockets of the unsavory pair. He tossed aside the odds and ends the Mexican gave up, but paused suddenly as he came upon a roll of gold pieces neatly packeted.

"Two hundred pesos," he muttered, after counting the coin. "Hellion must have been doin' well by himself."

But he whistled a moment later when the white man's pocket disgorged a similar roll of gold which also totaled two hundred dollars. Holding the money on the palm of his bronzed hand, he stared at the rushing water.

"Looks like a payoff to me," he mused. "Jiggers got paid in advance for a chore they had to do—and I'll bet it was to stop that boat. Well, they didn't stop it, but they sent it into the canyon, which is about the same thing. But, blazes! It looked like that bunch in the boat were headin' it for the canyon. They were in the channel, and it sure looked like they were aimin' straight for the old Santa Helena."

He gazed across the tawny flood to Mexico. "And I'm willin' to bet, too," he added, "that those fellers in the boat were part of Cavorca's bunch. Now just who would be sent to stop them from this side the river? That's one I'd sure like the answer to."

His glance returned to the dead men. Again he went over the bodies, tearing out the lining of pockets, turning out hatbands, even removing boots and carefully scrutinizing heels and soles for possible concealed hiding places.

Finally, with a disgusted growl, he gave up. "This sort never have anything on them that will give a line as to who they're tied up with," he muttered. "Well, the coroner can ride down and look them over, if he wants to."

He turned and gazed speculatively to the northeast, where Cigar Mountain loomed against the sky, shifting his glance eastward from the great peak to where he knew was the site of Study Butte, where quicksilver had been mined for many years. Chief of the mines was the old Chisos, but some twelve or fourteen other mines had been opened since the discovery of the Chisos.

Mexicans living in primitive fashion found employment in the mines. The whole section had been easy going and peaceful until less than a year before. Then gold had been discovered in the hills between Cigar Mountain and Study Butte, and since then there had been little peace and less of quiet. Especially lacking in both qualities was the mining town of Tule.

"And I've a notion Tule is where those hellions skalleyhooted for," the sheriff mused, apropos of the drygulching horsemen he had seen ride away. "Well, I reckon I'll head for Tule myself. And Hughes said he would be there today and meet me if I could make it."

With a last glance at the bodies and the turbulent river, he mounted and rode north by east.

The sun was low in the west before Loring reached Tule. Almost due east, he could see the vast bulk of the Chisos Mountains, outlined in towered and battlemented ruggedness against the blue of the Texas sky. This was hole-in-the-wall country and a favorite hangout of gentlemen with pasts and presents that would not bear investigation, and unpredictable futures.

"Mighty likely that bunch I saw ride away from the river was headed for the Chisos," he mused, "but I'm playin' a hunch that they might have stopped off at Tule."

THE BIG BEND is a sparsely settled region, but a gold strike is apt to increase astonishingly the population of a section. Such was the case with Tule, which was considerably larger than the county seat and boasted enough inhabitants to make things rather more than lively.

The sheriff tied his horse at one of the long hitchracks and entered the Root Hog, a big combination saloon and restaurant. He pushed through the swinging doors, paused and glanced about. Almost immediately he spotted, alone at a corner table, a quiet, mild-mannered and elderly gentleman with almost white hair and a short beard liberally streaked with gray.

He looked more like a benign church deacon than what he really was, one of the most famous of Texas Ranger captains. Folks said that a six-shooter and a Bible were Captain Hughes' constant companions, and that he was equally adept with either.

With a nod, Loring crossed the room and sat down opposite the Ranger captain, who returned the nod without speaking and rested his gaze on the lean, bronzed face of the young sheriff.

"Well," he asked at length, "find out anything?"

"Not much," Loring replied, "but mebbe more than I figure. I'll tell yuh about it. Anything new with you?"

Captain Hughes shook his head. "Just the same old story," he replied. "We're watching this whole section of the Border. Governor Alvarez has his *rurales* strung along the other side of the river with their eyes skun. *El Presidente* sent up a detachment of regulars from Mexico City to give Alvarez a hand and they are on the job, but still the stuff is getting through. Manuel Cavorca is a smooth, oily old scoundrel if there ever was one! He has every owlhoot, *peon* beater and other scallywag in Chihuahua back of him, and all he needs is rifles and ammunition to arm them with and he'll win the election month after next, hands down, and again be Governor of Chihuahua 'by the will of the people.'

"Then before the year is out he'll have his own men heading the government in Sonora and in Coahuila. And then in another six months he'll be all set for a full-fledged revolution. *El Presidente* realizes

the danger and is giving Alvarez all the help he can. But he's got troubles of his own in other sections and hasn't many men to spare. No wonder Alvarez is fit to be roped!"

"And if this thing really gets out of hand, there'll be trouble aplenty along the Texas Border," Loring commented gravely. "The time will come when somebody across the Border will really clean house, and then they'll have a government by the will of the people. It'll come, but not by way of the Cavorca sort."

Captain Hughes nodded. "Governor Alvarez is a square-shooter," he observed. "When he upset old Cavorca and got elected governor, he cleaned house for fair. Kicked out all the Cavorca bunch of sidewinders. Naturally, they didn't like it and are trying to get the upper hand again."

"And with Cavorca havin' Murray De Spain to help him up here, they're likely to do it, if we don't bust up the De Spain smugglin' bunch," Loring declared with conviction.

Hughes cast the sheriff a curious glance. "You're still convinced there is really such a man as Murray De Spain, then?"

Sheriff Loring nodded grimly. "There is," he said. "Oh, I know he's regarded almost as a legend, an owlhoot build-up, but he exists, all right. I saw him once."

"What does he look like?" Hughes asked, interested.

"Just about the finest-lookin' man I ever saw," Loring returned. "Big, straight as an Injun, with curly yellow hair, plumb perfect features and blue eyes with twin devils glintin' out of them."

Captain Hughes contemplated his table companion and wondered if the young peace officer had ever taken the trouble to glance into a mirror.

"They say he's from Tennessee," Loring went on. "A gentleman in the beginnin', I calc'late. Busted with his folks and went bad. Been all over the world and done most everything. Revolutions in South America and such. He's about the fastest gunhand in the whole Southwest. Usually goes masked. I've a notion, though, I'd know him again even if he was masked, if I got a good look at his right hand."

"How's that?"

"Well, that time I saw him was when he and his bunch figured to hold up the Persimmon Gap stage. Him and me went for our hardware, and he sort of lost the end off his middle finger. I still got the gun he pulled. Goin' to have the busted butt plate fixed up some time, though I ain't much on pearl-handled irons—too slippery."

Captain Hughes smiled in his beard. "'Fastest gunhand in the whole Southwest'!" he quoted under his breath Loring's remark about Murray De Spain. Aloud he observed:

"He got away, then?"

"That's right," replied Loring. "They got to their horses, except one that stopped behind. I was ridin' the stage and didn't have my horse along. The cashed-in jigger was an ornery-lookin' coot."

CHAPTER II

Cantina in the Mexican Quarter

HUGHES smiled again. "You say you had something to tell me?" he suggested.

Loring nodded, and regaled the Ranger with an account of the happenings he witnessed at the canyon mouth. Hughes was very interested.

"And the stuff in the boat appeared to be wrapped in sacking?" he mused. "Rifles and ammunition—not a doubt of it. Yes, rifles and ammunition intended for Cavorca. And you say the boat went into the canyon? Well, that's one load he won't get. No boat like what you described could live through the Santa Helena."

Loring rolled a cigarette and lighted it. For some minutes he smoked in silence.

"Captain," he said at length, "I wonder could they by any chance run the stuff by way of the canyon?"

Hughes laughed aloud. "Why, son," he replied, "that canyon is from fifteen to eighteen hundred feet deep. Rock slides and rapids make navigation practically impossible through it. No old flatbottom could stay afloat for a third of the fifteen miles to the south mouth."

"But suppose," Loring persisted, "they didn't go all the way through but tied up

someplace and sent the stuff up the far wall. There are game trails up the walls, pertickler on the Mexican side. I've a notion a man could get up by way of some of those trails."

"Reckon I know as much about those trails as anybody," the captain replied. "I'll agree that an active man *might* scramble up by way of them, but not packing a load of rifles and ammunition."

"Mules and burros are mighty surefooted critters," remarked Loring.

"Agreed," said the captain, "but nobody could get mules or burros to go down the trails there, and even if they could, the critters couldn't get out again, loaded. Goats could do it, I reckon, but you can't pack that sort of a load on a goat's back."

Loring nodded. "Reckon yuh're right," he admitted, "but it sure looked to me like that boat was headin' for the canyon. It's sure for certain, too, that they couldn't have gotten the stuff past the patrols this side of the canyon."

"They're getting it past somehow," growled the captain, "and if they keep on, Manuel Cavorca is going to be the big skookum he-wolf below the Line."

"And," Loring declared, "if he does get control of the Mexican government, Murray De Spain will be tellin' him what to do!"

Loring and the captain had something to eat. Hughes finished a final cup of coffee, rose to his feet and lighted a cigar.

"I'm going to turn in," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."

Hughes nodded, and left the saloon. A little later Loring also strolled out. He visited place after place, scanning faces, listening to random talk at the bars and games. Gradually, as the evening wore on, he worked south into the quarter where the Mexican quicksilver miners lived.

This was the old portion of the town, and here Spanish was spoken much more than was English. Black velvet-and-silver *conchas* took the place of corduroys and overalls. Chattering groups stood on the street corners. Dark-haired *senoritas* drifted past, flashing bright-eyed glances at the tall young sheriff. Peons in hempen sandals, *serapes* and huge *sombreros* shuffled along. There was a sprinkling of Mexican cowhands. Strolling troubadours with mandolin or guitar passed in and out of the *cantinas*.

About midnight, Loring paused before a rather ornate *cantina*. The place, he knew, was owned by one Tomas Garcia. Loring knew Garcia by sight. He was a fat, oily man with a bland smile. Folks said that Garcia engaged in activities rather less innocent than the running of a drinking place, but nothing had ever been proven against him.

Loring hesitated a moment, then, hat pulled low over his eyes, entered the *cantina*.

GARCIA'S was rather dimly lighted by two big hanging lamps, one over the bar, the other above the center of the dance floor. The atmosphere of the place was accentuated by the shivery wail of muted violins and the liquid notes of softly thrummed guitars.

Garcia himself presided behind the bar. Assisting him were three bartenders, hard-faced, alert men whose eyes seemed to miss nothing. The same description applied to the dealers at the games and the waiters padding about.

Unnoticed, Rance Loring made his way across the room and sat down behind a table close to the wall. He ordered a drink and sat sipping it, the while his keen ears gathered in scraps of conversation. Mostly Spanish was spoken, which he understood very well.

"Most anything liable to happen in here," he mused. For some time he sat listening and watching.

During a lull in the music, when the orchestra was having a drink, a troubadour strolled in, strumming his guitar. He was tall, well formed, the breadth of his shoulders and the narrowness of his waist accentuated by his elaborate and tight-fitting costume. A silken scarf was wound about his head, gypsy style, completely covering his hair, the ends hanging down the back of his flowered-and-braided jacket. His ornate *sombrero*, heavily crusted with silver, was drawn low over his eyes. A handkerchief of flame-colored silk muffled his throat almost to his chin, so that little could be seen between hatbrim and neckerchief save a straight nose, a square chin and a gleam of eyes.

He glanced toward the orchestra leader

inquiringly, got a nod in return and walked lithely to the middle of the dance floor. With a sudden flash of white teeth, he struck a booming chord on his guitar and began to sing in a pure, sweet tenor a love song of Old Spain.

Abruptly the babble of conversation was hushed. Rance Loring, who loved really good music, straightened in his chair. The singer's voice was decidedly out of the ordinary. Very quickly, the whole attention of the room centered upon him.

People began pushing in from the street, attracted by the unusual quality of the impromptu entertainment. Along with the jostling crowd, a number of dark-faced men with keen, watchful eyes drifted into the room by ones and twos. While appearing to wander aimlessly about, they took up strategic positions. Their regard centered on the singer with a singular intentness.

But the singer's eyes gazed straight ahead—straight toward where Tomas Garcia stood with both fat hands outspread on the bar. Without the slightest preliminary warning, the singer's voice snapped off short in the middle of a verse. Again it rang through the room, all the music gone from it, hard and cold as frosted steel, as the dropped guitar thudded on the floor.

"Tomas Garcia!"

The *cantina* owner straightened up as if jerked erect by a hidden wire. The singer's hand flashed to his belt, came up in a move too swift for the eye to follow. At the same instant his other hand swept the *sombrero* and scarf aside, revealing a head of curling golden hair and two bazing blue eyes.

Garcia screamed, terrible in its terror. Across the room darted a lance of light to center on Garcia's throat. He fell forward, clawing at the bar, over which spouted a torrent of blood from the gaping knife wound in his throat.

A split-second before the room fairly exploded with gunfire, Sheriff Loring's amazed shout shattered the stunned silence.

"Murray De Spain!"

THE GOLDEN-HAIRED singer whirled at the sound of the sheriff's voice. With the same effortless ease with which he drew and hurled the knife, he whipped a gun from his belt. Loring's hand flickered down and up.

But before either could pull trigger, a screaming Mexican, his ear bullet-nicked, glaring wildly over his shoulder as he fled, barged full into the sheriff's table. Down went Mexican, table, chairs and sheriff in a screeching, cursing tangle. Into the wall thudded De Spain's bullet. Over the ruin of furniture and the sprawling bodies of Loring and the Mexican swept the panic-stricken crowd.

Two of Garcia's bartenders were down. The third was staggering about, shot to pieces, dying on his feet. Two dealers and a waiter were dead. Those remaining on their feet were shooting in every direction.

Murray De Spain's gun muzzle tipped up, flashed fire. The lamp over the dance floor snuffed out. De Spain spun around, fired again. Out went the lamp over the bar. Black darkness swept the room.

Loring got the Mexican by the nape of the neck and hurled him out of the way. Another moment and he was on his feet, still gripping his gun, fighting his way toward the door. As he neared it, he heard a clatter of fast hoofs outside.

"Made their getaway!" he hoarsed. "Talk about teamwork! Better than a prime cuttin' horse and a rope!"

By sheer strength, he bored his way through the throng of terror-stricken humanity and pushed out through the door. Outside it was a riot with men fighting to get in the clear, others fighting to get nearer the scene of excitement. Inside the cantina guns were still banging, furniture smashing, voices bawling curses. A reddish glow was ominously framing the window panes. Evidently the oil from the bullet-punctured lamps had caught fire.

Loring shouldered his way to a comparatively clear space, gazed speculatively at the burning building.

"Reckon everybody will get out except Garcia and a few of his hellions, and they won't mind a mite more fire," he decided. "Anyhow, I know somethin' for sure, now. It *was* some of De Spain's bunch handlin' that boat. And it isn't hard to figure this ruckus out. It was some of Garcia's hellions that drygulched the boat. I've heard reports that Garcia was mixed up in smugglin' and such things. Reckon

it's a case of two owlhoot outfits fallin' out among themselves. De Spain knew who drygulched his men and came here to even up the score.

"No matter what Hughes says, I'm plumb sure for certain now that there's a way to reach Mexico by way of that darned canyon. Think I'll go and look up Hughes."

CHAPTER III

Loring Crosses the Border

CAPTAIN HUGHES, when Loring found him, had been aroused by the tumult and standing in the street outside his rooming house, watching the fire.

"Little excitement, eh?" Hughes greeted the sheriff. "How did it start?"

Loring told him, in terse sentences. The Ranger captain nodded his white head. "Your *amigo,* De Spain, eh? Sounds to be considerable of a gent."

"He is," Loring replied grimly.

"I've a notion you are right about that boat being manned by De Spain's bunch," observed Hughes, "but I still can't see 'em gettin' to *mañana* land by way of the canyon. Why, birds have been known to starve to death in that hole! Get in and can't get out again, because of the down draughts, I reckon. Nothing can live in there."

Loring nodded, reserving opinion.

The noise in front of the burning *cantina* was quieting down.

"My deputies are probably there by now—yuh know I have three stationed here in Tule—and they've got things under control," said Loring. "The people who live down in that end of town are excitable, but they're good, hard-workin' folks with respect for authority. The boys won't have any trouble with them.

"I'm sort of keepin' undercover myself. Not many folks know I'm in town, and I figure the less I'm noticed the better. I aim to take a little ride in the mornin', and I don't want to be wearin' a tail."

Captain Hughes shot the sheriff a curious glance, but as Loring did not see fit to explain further, he asked no questions.

"Well, I've a notion your friend De Spain did us a favor by downing Garcia," he remarked. "The Rangers have had an eye on Senor Tomas for quite a spell, but never able to pin anything on him. I sort of lean to the notion that Garcia, and not that jigger De Spain, was the real head of Cavorca's smuggling band. Maybe De Spain busted that up for us tonight. But again maybe De Spain figures to take over himself," Hughes added, frowning slightly.

Loring smiled, but said nothing.

"Well," concluded the captain, "I'm going back to bed. Want to ride for the post early tomorrow. Keep in touch with me, Rance, and let me know if you learn anything more."

Hughes returned to his room. Loring remained outside the rooming house for a little while, then turned and walked back up town. He paused at a little restaurant and purchased some staple provisions. Then he went to the stable where he had housed his horse before starting out to do the town.

He got the rig on the moros, stowed the provisions in his saddle pouches, along with a few simple cooking utensils. Then he led the horse out, mounted and rode swiftly in the direction of Mexico.

"I figure we can get across the river before it's light," he told the moros. "Less chance of bein' spotted that way, and mebbe we can hit on somethin' on the other side. I'm playin' a hunch and hopin' it'll be a straight one. Won't do to make any slips, though. We've got no business prowlin' around down there, or so the Mexican authorities probably would figure."

THE PALE shadow of the false dawn was fleeting across the sky when Loring reached the Rio Grande. The river had fallen somewhat, but was still dangerously high. He located a ford; they had to swim for it in midchannel, but made the far bank without mishap. Before the rising sun flooded the wild country with a sheen of gold, they were well into the hills that flanked the canyon rim.

Loring rode steadily until he had covered some ten miles or so of the canyon's extent. Then, in a little grass-grown clearing in a thicket he left his horse, knowing that the well trained animal would not stray. Then he made his haz-

ardous way to the canyon rim and began working back the way he had come, on foot.

Before the sun had crossed the zenith, Loring began to be of the opinion that Captain Hughes knew what he was talking about when he insisted the game trails along the rim and down the walk could be negotiated only by mountain goats.

At times he was forced to clamber over rock slides or under great boulders, and even worm his way through narrow openings in the scatterings of talus. Finally he gave it up for the day, worked back into the hills, where travel was easier, and returned to the thicket where he left his horse. He was weary and footsore, and rather discouraged. It began to look as if his hunch was off-trail.

"No wonder the *rurales* won't bother to patrol this section," he told himself gloomily as he surveyed the forbidding terrain rolling away from the canyon rim. "A crow would have to pack his rations with him across here, or starve to death."

In the clearing by the brook, he made a fire and cooked a meal. After liberal rations and numerous cups of steaming coffee, he felt considerably better.

"I've got five or six miles yet to cover before makin' the north mouth of the canyon," he told the horse. "In the mornin' we'll ride back to where I left off today and I'll twirl my loop at it again. I still figure the stuff comes through here somewhere . . ."

The following morning was well gone and he was some three miles from the north mouth of the canyon, when Loring at last got a break. He had been forced to detour an impossible stretch of the rim and was a considerable distance back in the hills, when suddenly he came upon a faint track that showed signs of recent usage. It was scarred by narrow hoofmarks. As Loring examined the prints, his eyes glowed with excitement.

"Mule tracks, sure as blazes!" he exulted. "Mules have been this way durin' the last few days, and quite a few of them!"

He turned and gazed toward the ominous rim of the canyon. The trail apparently led toward it, but he could see little because of the thick chaparral growth through which it ran. Eagerly he set out to follow the tracks. He was within five hundred yards of the rim when the trail branched. And here the tracks were scattered and numerous.

"The mules were tied here, or held," he told himself. "They—now what in blazes is this?"

Here and there among the mule tracks were other prints—prints such as Loring had never before seen. They were roughly round, with no frog marks, and small.

"Almost like somebody had tied a rag over a little mule's hoof," he muttered.

Again he stared toward the rim, aglow in the afternoon sunlight. He shook his head, and dropped his gaze to the branch of the trail that swerved away from the track leading to the rim and was swallowed up by the chaparral. Scarring its surface were many of the strange prints that so excited his curiosity.

He hesitated a moment longer, then decided to follow the side fork. Instinctively he moved forward with caution, pausing often to peer and listen.

AS HE progressed Loring became aware of sound other than the low murmur of the rushing water in the canyon's depths—a strange, bubbling and grunting varied occasionally by thin bleats. The sounds loudened as he crept on.

In the eagerness aroused by his curiosity, he quickened his step, swerved around a bristle of growth and abruptly found himself on the edge of a small clearing completely surrounded by thicket.

He did not at once observe other details—he had other things to thing about. For standing not a dozen paces distant was a man with a raised rifle in his hands.

With a yell of surprise and alarm, the man clamped the rifle butt against his shoulder. His eyes glinted along the sights.

Loring hurled himself sideways and down a split-second before the black muzzle gushed flame and smoke. He heard the bullet screech over him, saw the rifle muzzle jerk down for a second shot. But before the man could pull trigger again, both the sheriff's guns let go with a rattling crash.

The man reeled back as if struck by a mighty fist. The rifle dropped from his hands. He spun around and fell headlong, his limbs jerking and twitching. Loring leaped to his feet, guns ready, but the

rifleman was decidedly dead.

Tense and alert, the sheriff strode forward. He turned the body over, stared into a dark, contorted face.

"Another breed," he muttered. "Well, I'm on a spot now. I don't pack any official authority down here, and if a bunch of *rurales* heard the shootin' and come along to see what it's about, I'm liable to find myself tryin' to answer some embarrassin' questions."

Squatting back on his heels, he raised his head and listened intently. His gaze swept the clearing, and abruptly he forgot all about the *rurales* and everybody else. Near the far side of the clearing was a small corral, and back of the bars were a score or so of extraordinary creatures, the like of which Loring had never seen.

They were sturdy little animals, something over three feet high at the shoulders and perhaps five feet in length. Their bodies were covered with long, wooly hair, nearly white in color. For tails they had mere stumps. Their necks were astonishingly long, surmounted by almost doglike heads with perky ears and mild, questioning eyes. Their legs were also long, and terminated in queer, round two-toed hoofs.

For moments Loring stared in amazement, utterly at a loss as to what the strange animals might be. Then remembrance of pictures he had seen and descriptions he had read rushed upon him. And the mystery of the apparently impossible canyon trails was solved!

"For the love of Pete!" he exploded. "South American llamas! The 'camels' of the Andes Mountains, that the Peruvians use to pack stuff over the mountain trails where nothing else can go!"

He sprang to his feet, eyes blazing. "And Murray De Spain spent a couple of years in South America, so folks say!" he exclaimed. "He must have learned plenty about llamas. Best as I recollect, those little beggars can pack a hundred-pound load straight up a cliff, or mighty nigh it. Born and brought up in the mountains! Won't live anywhere else!

"De Spain got 'em from South America, of course, brought 'em up here and is usin' 'em to pack his rifles and ammunition up from the canyon. I was plumb right about that darn boat: It *was* headed for the canyon. And I'll bet that other fork of the trail runs down into the canyon. Well, we'll see about that in a hurry!"

Thinking he'd better dispose of the guard, he carried the body into the brush, shoved it into a crack between two rocks. Then he returned to the clearing. He saw that there was a small spring inside the corral, and that ample forage for the llamas was scattered about. Further investigation discovered a lean-to built in the edge of the growth, wherein was a small store of provisions and some tumbled blankets. There was no sign of a riding rig.

"Reckon the jigger didn't have a horse," he decided. "Chances are he was one of the mule drivers and went off with the mules after the loads were transferred from the llamas. Now for that trail."

As Loring surmised, the track led straight over the canyon rim. It was a hair raising path that wound along dizzy ledges dipping down the precipitous sides of the gorge. However, he reached the canyon floor without mishap.

Here a little strip of beach flanked the water's edge. It was covered with scattered boulders and at either end were jumbles of rocks.

"Plenty of places to hole up," the sheriff decided. "Well, I've a feelin' *amigo* De Spain is in for a mite of a surprise. And I'll bet a peso he'll be along with the next load, after the row the last one got mixed up in. He'll want to be handlin' things in person!"

The sun was low in the west when the sheriff, breathless and streaming perspiration, reached the rimrock once more. He set out at a fast pace through the hills, to where he had left his horse. He crossed the Rio Grande under cover of darkness and set out for the Ranger post, nearly forty miles to the northwest.

"I've got to get hold of Hughes *pronto*," he told the moros. "He knows how to get in touch with the *rurales*."

CHAPTER IV

From River Bed to Rimrock

WHEN he reached the post, shortly after daylight, Loring encountered a complication that threatened to set his

plans at naught. Nobody was there except a clerk left in charge of the captain's office.

"Hughes and the boys rode west yesterday afternoon," the clerk informed him. "No, I don't know for sure when he'll be back, but I figure this afternoon. McDowell, over to headquarters, sent for him."

LORING swore in exasperation. He stood for a moment in thought.

"Get pencil and paper and take down what I tell yuh, and take it down straight," he directed. "Give it to Hughes the minute he gets in. Tell him I'm headin' for Tule to pick up my deputies, and that I'm goin' after those hellions tonight with my boys, goin' it alone. I don't intend to let that yellow-haired sidewinder, De Spain, slip out of my loop. He knows things are gettin' hot, he'll slide off somewhere else."

The clerk exclaimed in amazement as Loring related the details of his experience.

"But I've heard llamas won't live any place but down in the Andes," he remarked.

"Mebbe they won't, for long," Loring agreed. "But I reckon De Spain knew they'd last long enough to do what was required of 'em. Yuh got those directions straight? Hughes knows the country down there and hadn't ought to have any trouble spottin' the place."

The clerk offered a suggestion: "Why not send word to the *rurales?*"

"Because old Cavorca has spies planted everywhere," Loring replied. "He'd be sure to catch on that somethin' was in the wind, and I 'low he keeps in close touch with De Spain. No, it's up to Hughes. He knows how to get word through."

With that, Loring took off for Tule.

Once in Tule, Loring corralled his deputies and gave them precise instructions.

"I know where to tie onto a boat," one offered. "I know a fishin' guy down at Lolitos who'll let us have one. He's a right hombre and will keep his mouth shut."

"Fine," the sheriff said. "I've about figured it out that they are mighty liable to run in a load of the stuff tonight. I'm playin' a hunch that the reason that guard was there in the clearin' with the llamas, which don't need any lookin' after, was because they 'lowed to use the critters mighty soon. He had just about enough chuck in his lean-to to hold him over today, so I figure tonight is it."

"Sounds reasonable," said the deputy.

"Okay, then," concluded the sheriff. "I'm goin' to knock off a couple of hours of shuteye. We'll ride as soon as it gets dark. I don't think they'll risk movin' another load by daylight, not after what happened to them the last time."

NOT LONG after nightfall found Loring and his deputies—Crane, Doran and Halsey—afloat on the Rio Grande. Less than a mile ahead yawned the dark mouth of the Santa Helena. A sheen of starlight silvered the river, but it vanished the instant the black walls swallowed their boat. There would be a moon a little later, however.

"Hope we don't run past that darn beach in the dark," Loring remarked grimly. "If we do and get into the rapids farther down—well, I reckon Cavorca and De Spain won't have to worry about us anymore.

"I figure I've got the point pretty well spotted, though," he added consolingly. "I was mighty careful about that as I rode back up the river yesterday."

With the plainsman's uncanny sense of distance and direction, Loring spotted the beach without difficulty. They hauled the little boat ashore, concealed it behind some boulders and took up places among the rocks. Then came about the most trying time of a ruckus, when nerves are strained by waiting and unpleasant reflections crowd into the mind.

The east rim of the canyon began to glow. A tiny line of silver flame appeared against the sky and the full moon climbed higher until it was directly overhead, casting its beams straight into the gorge and causing the sands of the beach to glitter brightly.

The river was a flood of liquid light, but under the chimney rocks where the four peace officers crouched was deep shadow. Directly above them climbed the dizzy trail to the rimrock.

The situation, for the moment, was ideal for the small posse; but complications were in order. A wind had risen shortly after nightfall and with it came storm clouds. When one of these drifted across

the moon, the canyon was in deep shadow.

It was in one of these periods of shadow that the smugglers' boat arrived. Loring's keen ears detected a sound above the rush of the river.

"Get set," he whispered to his deputies. "There's something movin' out there."

Slowly the cloud that obscured the moon drifted on. It thinned to ragged streamers and the silvery light poured down, revealing the loaded boat moored to the bank. Three of the seven men in the boat had just stepped ashore. Foremost was Murray De Spain, the moonlight glinting on his yellow hair.

"Let's go!" whispered Loring. He stepped from the shadow, a gun in each hand, his deputies fanned out beside him. "Elevate!" he shouted. "Yuh're covered!"

The astounded smugglers whirled about to stare into unwavering gun muzzles. Black rage and hatred contorted Murray De Spain's face, wiping away all its handsomeness and leaving it hideous.

"Loring!" he cried hoarsely. "Curse yuh, I'll—"

"Up!" roared the sheriff. The double click of his gun hammers emphasized the command.

De Spain slowly raised his hands. His followers did likewise.

And a thick, black cloud swept across the moon.

Dimly Loring saw De Spain leap sideways through the shadow. He pulled both triggers. Instantly the canyon was roaring with gunfire. Lead stormed about the posse. Deputy Crane swore viciously as a bullet furrowed his arm. Loring felt another tear through the sleeve of his own coat.

"Behind the rocks!" he shouted, suiting the action to the word.

The deputies instantly took the hint as red flashes stabbed toward them through the dark. They could hear the other men scrambling out of the boat and into cover of the boulders. They shot at the sounds and the flashes, but it was blind chance. A moment later the firing ceased.

Slowly the cloud drifted on. Once again the moonlight streamed down, to reveal two bodies sprawled near the beached boat. Of the remaining smugglers, nothing could be seen.

"Holed up behind those rocks at the other end," said Loring. He peered at the bodies. "Neither of 'em De Spain," he growled. "That hellion always gets the breaks!"

LORING raised himself a little more for a better look. A gun banged at the far end of the beach and a slug fanned his face. The deputies returned the fire, chipping fragments from the boulders. Answering shots kept them huddled behind their own protection.

"Hold it," Loring ordered. "We're just wastin' ammunition. Watch close for a hellion to show himself, then let him have it. Blazes! I hope Hughes got that message I left for him. This is gettin' too darn interestin' for comfort!"

A few minutes later, it got still more "interesting." Seemingly from somewhere in the sky a gun boomed. A bullet thudded against the rock that sheltered the sheriff. It was followed by another and another.

"The rest of 'em have come down the trail!" yelped Deputy Halsey. "They're holed up on the ledge, right above us! Darn it! That one knocked meat off my leg!"

He rolled over on his back and blazed away at the lip of the ledge which slanted along a score of feet up the cliff. The smugglers behind the boulders gave whoops of triumph and let loose a volley.

A patch of cloud gave the hard-pressed posse a moment of respite.

"Keep your eyes peeled," whispered Loring as the darkness closed down. "They may try to rush us."

However the smugglers didn't, doubtless sensing an easier victory with the posse between two fires.

The cloud was a big one and passed slowly. Gradually, however, it began to thin.

"Here comes the showdown," Loring said grimly. "Try and take a few of the hellions with yuh, fellers!"

He cocked his guns, braced himself for the finish.

Down poured the moonlight. From the ledge above sounded a roar of shots and a wild yelling. Something hurtled through the air to thud almost beside Loring. It was the body of a man.

For a moment the sheriff was at a loss as to what had happened. Then he understood and let out an exultant whoop.

"It's the *rurales!*" he yelled to his men. "Hughes got my message! Give it to 'em boys, give it to 'em!"

The smugglers above were getting it plenty, to judge from their screams for mercy and the rattle of gunfire. Suddenly the bunch behind the boulders broke cover and rushed wildly toward the beached boat. Loring leaped from behind the rock that sheltered him as Murray De Spain came into view. The bandit leader's gun flashed forward. The two shots roared as one.

Loring gasped as a bullet burned a streak along his ribs. He saw De Spain stagger, and fired again.

The bandit leader reeled sideways and fell over the steep bank into the river. With a sullen plunge he vanished beneath the hurrying water. He did not rise again. His followers threw down their guns and howled for mercy.

There was a clatter of boots on the ledge above. Down the trail stormed the *rurales,* with Captain Hughes and a uniformed Mexican officer at their head.

"I got your message when I arrived at the post late in the afternoon," said the old Ranger as he shook Loring's hand. "I streaked it across the river so fast the water was steamin' behind me. Brought along the boys—not in an official capacity, of course—just for the ride. We got hold of Captain Ramirez and his men and high-tailed for the canyon. We were getting close when we heard the shooting.

"Then we really did sift sand. Run into a couple of hellions up on the rim herding a bunch of mules and those darn llamas you wrote about. Knocked 'em off before they could fire a shot. Reckon we got down here just in time. You were on a sort of hot spot, I 'low."

"Yuh can say that double," chuckled Loring. "Well, De Spain is feedin' the fishes and the rest of the bunch are corralled. A cute scheme, wasn't it—usin' the llamas to pack the stuff up the canyon trail? Goats haven't got a thing on those critters when it comes to scramblin' over straight-up-and-down rocks."

Hughes stroked his grizzled beard. "As I recollect, the Mexican government tried once or twice to introduce llamas into the mountain sections up here to be used for transport purposes," he said. "But they didn't thrive and they wouldn't breed, so the experiment was dropped. Reckon De Spain must have heard about it and corralled a few.

"It was a cute scheme, all right. De Spain had plenty of wrinkles on his horns. Wait a minute—I want to speak to Captain Ramirez."

A few minutes later, Captain Hughes returned, chuckling.

"Well, son," he said, "it looks like you busted up a revolution. The *rurales* are sort of proficient when it comes to making jiggers talk. Got some nice little methods down here. The prisoners are already spouting information that'll send old Manuel Cavorca streaking for cover. You did a fine chore, and if you ever get tired of your job of sheriffin'—well, there's worse things than being a Texas Ranger!"

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Now on Sale—Only 25c Per Copy at All Newsstands!

The thrill-packed true story of Ranger Reynolds, who planted himself in the middle of a deadly feud and brought in the lawless and dangerous Horrell brothers!

RANGER JUSTICE

BY HARRY VAN DEMARK

BY 1876 Texas' Indian troubles had been reduced to a minimum. The few marauding bands that were left were gradually being wiped out or driven across the frontiers into either Old or New Mexico by the Texas Rangers and detachments of the United States Army.

In the spring of 1877 the Texas Rangers became to all intents and purposes mounted State police, with orders to rid Texas of outlaws. So drastic was this clean-up that every man who could not give a satisfactory account of himself was placed under arrest.

It was during this period that Adjutant General Jones, head of the Texas Rangers, called Ranger Sergeant N. O. Reynolds to Austin.

"You've heard of the Horrell brothers, haven't you?" he inquired.

Reynolds nodded. "Yes, sir, it's that bunch that are raising so much cain down in Lampasas County."

"That's right. They're always in trouble, it seems. Just now they're feuding with Pink Higgins, the cattleman, and his men, and I want it broken up. Take your detail down there, Sergeant, and use your own judgment as to how you restore law and order."

Horrell trouble was nothing new to the Rangers. The brothers—there were originally six of them—were native Texans. One of them, John Horrell, had been killed in Las Cruces, New Mexico, some time before.

The Horrells were expert riders and had literally grown up with guns in their hands. They were lightning-fast with either six-shooter or rifle. The eldest was Sam Horrell, who was married and had a large family of children. He was a farmer, and at one time was highly respected in the community. The other four boys—Merritt, Ben, Tom and Mart—were ranchers, fairly well thought of, but dangerous when aroused.

Gunplay in Lampasas

In 1873 there was no wilder town on the frontier than Lampasas. Like most ranchers of the period the Horrells liked their fun, liked to go to town and gang up in the saloons and poolrooms. When under the influence of liquor they had been known to shoot up the town.

It was only natural that the more stable citizens of Lampasas should object to these brawls, which occurred usually in the late hours of the night. As a result, a complaint was registered with Edmund J. Davis, the provisional Governor of Texas, who sent a detachment of Rangers—four white men and a Negro—under the command of Captain Joe Williams.

The Rangers reached Lampasas about the middle of the afternoon, hitched their horses to a liveoak tree on the public plaza, left the Negro to guard the animals, then headed for Jerry Scott's saloon on the west side of the square.

Merritt, Tom and Mart Horrell were there, with a dozen other cowmen, drinking and playing billiards.

Ranger Captain Joe Williams was a brave man—brave to the point of recklessness. But he lacked the sound judgment needed to handle a situation like this. He walked over to the bar and called for drinks, then turned to Bill Bowen, Merritt Horrell's brother-in-law, and said gruffly:

"You're carrying a six-shooter. You're under arrest!"

Mart Horrell said, "Wait a minute." He stepped between the two men, said to Bowen:

"You haven't done anything, Bill. You don't have to submit to arrest if you don't want to."

A gun flashed in Williams' hand. There was a spurt of flame as it blasted and Mart Horrell sank to the floor, seriously wounded.

Guns popped into the hands of the other Horrell boys and their friends. In the battle that followed Captain Williams and two of his men, William Cherry and a Doctor Daniels, were killed. Ranger Andrew Melville, mortally wounded, staggered over to the Huling Hotel, where he died. The Negro who had been left to guard the horses mounted one of the animals and headed out of town, Austin bound.

Thus, because of Ranger Joe Williams' lack of judgment in handling a delicate situation which might have been settled peacefully, four Rangers were killed and one of the Horrells was wounded. Merritt and Tom Horrell carried the stricken Mart to their mother's home nearby, then mounted their horses and left town in a hurry.

Heading for New Mexico

Lampasas was quickly in an uproar. Indignant citizens again complained to Governor Davis, who sent another detachment of Rangers to Lampasas. They scoured the nearby country for the Horrells but failed to find them.

The wounded Mart Horrell and Saloonkeeper Jerry Scott were arrested and taken to Georgetown, Williamson County, and lodged in jail. Mart Horrell's wife insisted on going with him. She passed the word along the underground to her brothers-in-law of Mart's condition.

As soon as Mart was well enough, the other Horrell boys appeared suddenly one night at the head of a sizable party and

assaulted the jail. Officers and indignant citizens put up a stout fight, but they were outnumbered. The Horrells stationed themselves at every approach to the jail and kept up a steady fire at anyone who dared oppose them.

One of the Horrell gang, Bill Bowen, was wounded as he battered in the jail door with a sledgehammer. Mart Horrell and Jerry Scott were liberated and rode out of town with their rescuers.

A day or so later the Horrells were back at their home on Lucies Creek, fifty miles from Georgetown. They knew the Rangers would soon be on their trail, so decided to hightail it for New Mexico. In the party were John Dixon, Ben Turner, Bill and Tom Bowen and other desperate and dangerous men.

The law was slow to hit the trail; so, openly and without interference, they rounded up most of their cattle—even notified the sheriff of the exact day they would drive their herds through Russell Gap. In spite of the warning they were not molested.

The Horrells, with their families and followers, settled at the head of the Hondo River in Lincoln County, New Mexico. But trouble was right on their trail. Ben Horrell was shot and killed in a row at a dance near old Fort Stanton. When they heard the news, Ben's brothers immediately rode to the dance hall, where they killed nine Mexicans, including a woman.

The Horrells were now outlawed in New Mexico. The sheriff of Lincoln County started organizing a posse for a showdown, and the Horrells quickly picked up and headed back for the State line. Later, they turned up near their old haunts in Lampasas County.

The fight in Scott's saloon, when four Rangers were shot to death, had not been forgotten. Well-meaning friends advised the Horrells to surrender and stand trial, pleading self-defense. There were three brothers left—Mart, Tom and Merritt. They finally became convinced that if tried they would be acquitted, so they surrendered and stood trial—and sure enough the verdict was "Not guilty!"

This peaceful solution to their troubles did not last long. Pink Higgins, a rancher, accused Merritt Horrell of cattle rustling. This Merritt denied. Whereupon Higgins appeared in the doorway of a saloon one evening while Merritt was seated, unarmed, in a chair, and shot him to death.

Taking the Horrells

The moment the news reached Tom and Mart they armed themselves and headed for Lampasas. Higgins and his men waylaid the boys just outside of town, wounded Mart and shot Tom's horse from under him.

Thus developed one of the most bitter feuds of Texas frontier days. The opposing factions later staged a pitched battle in the streets of the town. One man on each side was killed. It was at this juncture that, in order to establish peace at any price, Adjutant General Jones sent Ranger Sergeant Reynolds and his men to restore order.

Reynolds was a man tried and true in the Ranger service. He had courage in abundance, with plenty of sound sense to go with it.

When he reported to Sheriff Sweet, of Lampasas County, he immediately inquired the whereabouts of the men he sought.

"Who d'you want first—Pink Higgins or the Horrells?" the sheriff asked.

"Let's start with the Horrells."

"Well, they're living about ten miles east of town. They've got ten or twelve desperate men with 'em. It's certain death to anyone who tries to take 'em."

Reynolds said simply, "I've been sent here to arrest them." Then, after the sheriff had voiced his opinion that the men would never be arrested, Reynolds asked: "Will you send a guide to show me where the Horrells live?"

"Yes, I'll do that—but I still advise you not to go."

Reynolds and his Rangers left Lampasas in the dead of night and rode to a point where a light could be seen flickering in the distance.

"That's it—that's where the Horrells live," the guide told Reynolds. Then he headed back to town.

It was a small ranch. The Rangers waited for daylight, then cautiously approached the place, expecting to receive a volley from the house or at least an invitation to halt. But all was still. The front door was partly open. Reynolds

pushed it wider.

Still hearing no sound, he beckoned to his men and they tiptoed right into the room where the Horrells and their followers were sleeping. Each Ranger pointed his Winchester at the head of a sleeper. Reynolds then pushed Mart Horrell with his foot, said:

"Wake up, Horrell—we've come after you!"

Every man in the room sat up in bed, to find himself staring into the grim muzzle of a gun. Reynolds said.

"We're Rangers. You're under arrest."

Accomplishing the Impossible

Tom Horrell said that they could not submit to arrest, and Mart declared it would be better to die fighting than to be hung by a mob.

Reynolds said, "If you start anything there'll be a dozen dead men here in less than a minute. If you surrender, I'll guarantee not only to protect you from mobs, but I'll agree not to turn you over to the sheriff. I'll guard you in my own camp until you can secure a preliminary hearing and make bond."

Mart Horrell got slowly to his feet. "This sounds reasonable, boys," he said. "I believe this Ranger means what he says—that he'll protect us until we can get a hearing and give bond."

Tom Horrell agreed and the others immediately fell in line. They surrendered their arms, mounted their horses and rode calmly into Lampasas under Ranger protection.

The news of the capture of the Horrells and their men spread through the town and surrounding county. People flocked to Lampasas by the hundreds to see the Ranger Sergeant who had accomplished what was considered an almost impossible feat.

When the news reached Austin, Adjutant General Jones hurried to the scene, and one of the first things he did was to promote Sergeant Reynolds to the rank of lieutenant.

Reynolds kept his word to the Horrells. They received a preliminary hearing, were admitted to bond. Mart Horrell sought out Reynolds and with tears streaming down his face, declared:

"In my estimation you're the bravest man in the world!"

When the news reached Pink Higgins that the Horrells had been captured, he made himself available to the law. Higgins was tried and acquitted of the murder of Merritt Horrell.

Before they could be brought to trial, Tom and Mart Horrell were concerned in a robbery and murder in Bosque County, Texas. They were captured by the authorities and lodged in jail, but were soon taken out and shot to death by an angry mob.

Look Forward to

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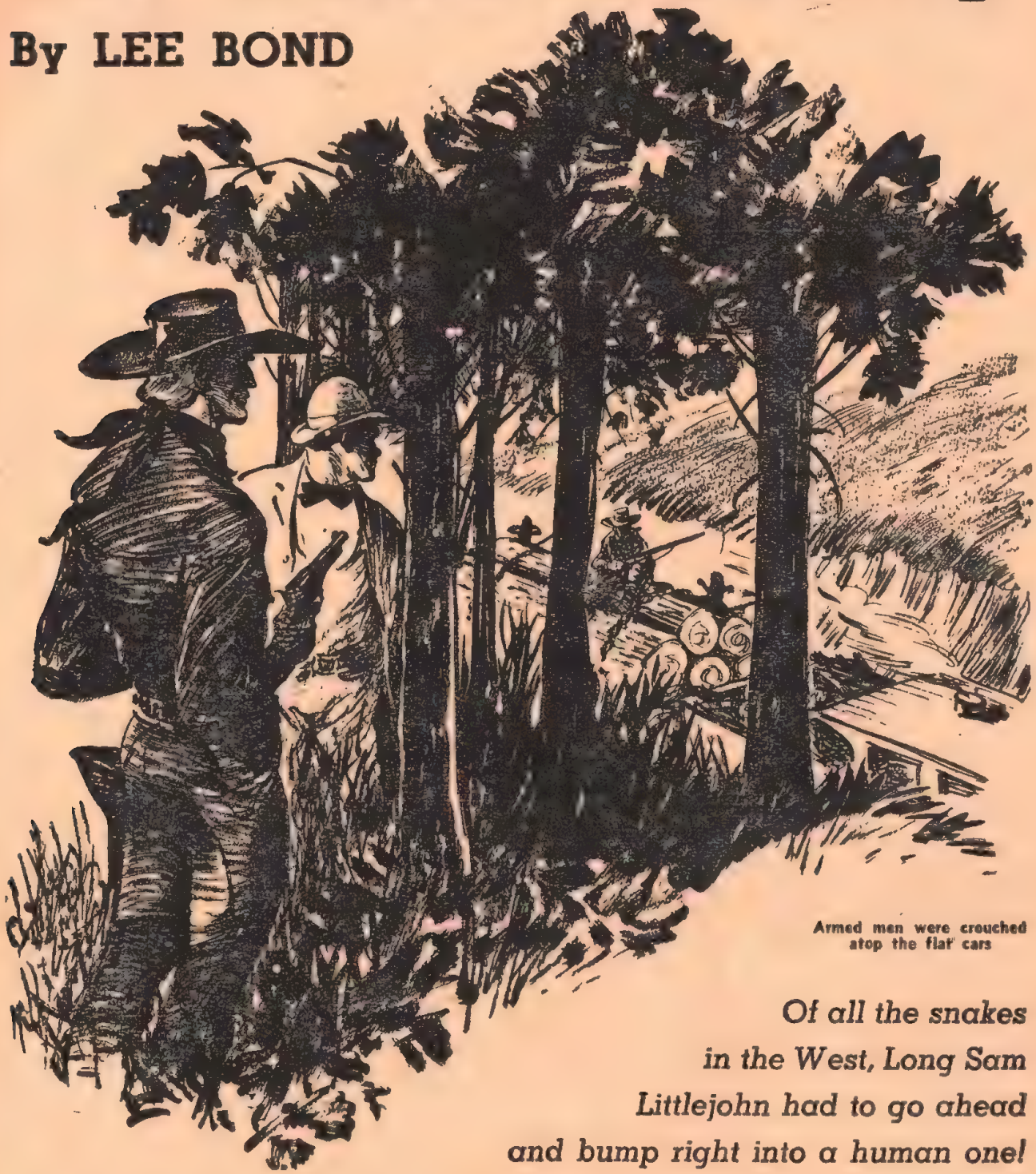

Armed men were crouched atop the flat cars

Of all the snakes in the West, Long Sam Littlejohn had to go ahead and bump right into a human one!

WITHOUT warning "Long Sam" Littlejohn leaped over the lip of the cut, his gaunt figure plunging down through the murky dawn. His boots were aimed at the stocky man who was there in the cut, crouched down to light the pile of brush he had stacked across the shining steel rails.

The crouched man heard the sound of the plummeting figure, jerked his derby-hatted head around sharply. He cried out, tried frantically to roll away, pulling at a gun tucked under the tail of his gray coat.

But Long Sam Littlejohn's attack had

been too swift. Outlawed, with a sizable reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Littlejohn knew how to move around without drawing attention to his actions. He felt his boots slam the stocky man, heard the gun the derbied gent had pulled go off with a thundering crash. Then Long Sam was tumbling along the cindery grade, bony hands clamped to the black butts of his own six-shooters to keep them from spilling out of holsters.

"Hold it, Fry!" he yelled.

The stocky man was wallowing around on the ground, cursing dazedly as he hunted his gun. His derby hat was gone, jarred off by the jolting he had taken.

"Joe Fry, Deputy U. S. Marshal!" Long Sam droned. "So you're one of the arsonists behind the trouble Pat Casey is havin' on this hundred miles of railroad of his?"

Joe Fry's square-jawed face was white with rage, twisting as if the frayed cigar butt in one corner of his cold-lipped mouth had been dipped in quinine. His blazing eyes sought Long Sam, who had stalked up and was standing above him.

"You crane-legged imitation of a human bein', you're under arrest!" Fry squalled. "What was the idea in tryin' to stave my back in? You sneakin'—"

"Shut up, Joe!" Long Sam interrupted coldly. "For more years than I like to remember you've hounded me, blamin' me for every low-down crime that's committed here in Texas. You hate me because I'm the only man you ever went after and didn't manage to kill or capture. But seein' you here, gettin' set to wreck one of Pat Casey's trains, makes me wonder, Fry, if you haven't pulled most of the sneakin' crimes your constant harpin' gets me accused of."

Joe Fry spat the ruined cigar stub out of his mouth, got up slowly, and stood brushing cinders from his suit.

"Tryin' to accuse me of attemptin' to wreck a train, are you? he panted finally.

"I stepped off that Sleeper hoss of mine out on top of the cut yonder, a half hour ago," Long Sam said. "I watched you pile this litter across the rails, Joe. You had a match struck and was ready to touch that stuff off, when I landed on you."

Joe Fry reached down, picked up his derby and sat it on his head. He looked, Long Sam thought, a lot more like a successful business man or drummer than the nervy, man-hunter he actually was.

"Get busy, Joe!" the gaunt outlaw bit the words out. "Yuh're pullin' this mess apart and throwin' it off the track!"

FRY SNORTED through his button nose, cursed Long Sam roundly, then seized the mound of brush and began pulling it off the tracks. Long Sam grinned faintly, eased down to where Fry's six-shooter lay behind a steel rail out of the badge-man's sight, and picked the gun up.

"If I had my hands on that gun, you noose-dodger, you'd sing a different tune!" the deputy flung the words out hotly.

"Shut up, and get to pitchin' brush!" Long Sam grunted. "I hear the train comin'. I want to see what's under that brush, Joe."

"There ain't anything in this mess of junk that'd wreck a train, and you know it!" Fry howled. "I heard that you were in Buckhorn last night, up yonder where this road Pat Casey stole joins the main line. I got a tip that you'd be on this southbound log train this mornin'. I aimed to stop that train, snake you off it."

"I haven't been to Buckhorn in six months," Long Sam snapped. "I was down yonder in Big Point last night, where this road of Pat Casey's touches the Valley Limited line run by Wilson Brule and his thugs. Did Brule hire you to wreck this train on Pat Casey's line, Joe?"

Joe Fry got so angry he looked sick. Long Sam wanted to grin but forced himself to scowl instead. Joe Fry was as honest as they came, and certainly would not stoop to a thing like wrecking a train. Long Sam was not at all surprised when Fry wrathfully flung the last piece of brush off the tracks and stood there glaring triumphantly over the fact that there was no dangerous obstruction of any kind on the rails.

"Now, Littlejohn, are you satisfied?" the deputy panted. "Are you willin' to admit that I wasn't aimin' to do nothin' but stop that log train?"

"You'd have had plenty of time to roll a half dozen big boulders down here to the rails before the train showed up," Long Sam droned. "Hike to the south end of the cut, yonder, before that train gets here. Because of such tricks as you tried here, Pat Casey has armed guards on all his

trains. They'll blast us if they catch us in this cut!"

Joe Fry blinked a couple of times, then trotted down to the south end of the cut, Long Sam at his heels. The gaunt outlaw ordered him to turn left into timber along a slope. They were barely out of sight when the whistle on the approaching train began screaming, and as it swept past Long Sam and the deputy both saw heavily armed men crouched atop the massive logs that were boomed to flat cars.

"They'd have shot the liver out of me!" Joe Fry said hoarsely as the train roared past.

"The engineer and the fireman saw that brush and knew somethin' was wrong," Long Sam grunted. "The screamin' whistle alerted the guards. They saw the brush there in the cut, too. So did the conductor and that brakie I saw on the tail end of the caboose."

"What are you gettin' at, you slab-sided hellion?" Joe Fry glared.

Long Sam grinned widenly now. "What I'm gettin' at is that you're under arrest, and that all the fellers on that train will turn up as witnesses at yore trial!"

"Arrest?" Fry squalled.

"Take a look at this, Joe," Long Sam chuckled.

"A badge!" Fry sounded as if he were strangling as he stared at the small gold-and-silver shield.

"That's right, Joe," Long Sam said, pocketing the emblem. "I signed on with Pat Casey, last night. Pat says I'm a special agent, or detective. Maybe he'll raise my pay, right sudden, when I waltz in the he-coon of the arsonists who have been tryin' to make him knuckle under and sell his little road to the dirty-dealin' Valley Limited outfit that's run by your bosom friend, Wilson Brule!"

"You listen to reason!" Joe Fry gulped. "Sure, me and Wilson Brule are acquainted. I've knowed Brule ever since—"

FRY BROKE off, scrubbing a hand nervously over his blunt chin. Long Sam prodded him with a gun muzzle, started him up the slope through the timber.

"You've knowed Wilson Brule ever since he was a hood-wearin', back-shootin' thug in the murderous gang that called themselves State Police, after the Civil War was over," Long Sam growled. "Wilson Brule was a lieutenant in that pack of organized terrorists. He stole such a fortune from men he helped murder that he built his Valley Limited railroad up the Rio Grande to Big Point.

"Alright, Littlejohn!" Fry groaned. "I've had experience enough as an officer to know that you've got me in an embarrassin' position."

"I never dreamed that it'd be *me* arrestin' *you!*" Long Sam chuckled.

"You wouldn't dare take me into Big Point!" Fry snapped. "Sheriff Ott Sheppard would shoot you on sight."

"You'll be surprised about that, I think," Long Sam declared.

Joe Fry *was* surprised when, little more than an hour later, Long Sam Littlejohn herded him boldly down the middle of Big Point's crowded street to the stone building that served as combination county jail and sheriff's office.

"This crowd!" Fry gritted as he dismounted.

"I don't like the crowd around here, either," Long Sam droned. "But I hear Pat Casey is in the sheriff's office, and I've a hunch he's here to tell about that brush his train crew and guards seen. Let's go in and clarify things for 'em, Joe."

"I don't savvy this," Fry groaned. "You, a bounty-plastered outlaw struttin' around with a badge and arrestin' decent people!"

"Decent people don't wreck trains, Joe," Long Sam grunted.

Men were banked before the sheriff's office, craning their necks, trying to look through the doors and windows.

"Let my prisoner through, boys!" Long Sam sang out, and Fry cursed him as men whirled, goggling.

The crowd split apart, men spreading back so hastily they stumbled against each other. Long Sam looked up into the startled eyes of rawboned Ott Sheppard, the Big Point sheriff. Behind Sheppard, his round, seamed face mirroring complete astonishment, was little Pat Casey.

"Howdy, Pat!" Long Sam grinned at Casey. "Over here reportin' what your train crew and guards seen out in the cut just above Bull Crick?"

"The crew and guards said there was considerable dry brush in that cut, Sam,

and figured somebody planned on another of my trains gettin' wrecked," Pat Casey gulped. "But, boy, this man you're holdin' a gun on is Joe Fry, a Deputy U. S. Marshal workin' out of Austin!"

"And the galoot who piled that brush on the tracks," Long Sam grunted. "I caught him startin' to set it on fire."

"But glory to goodness, Sam!" the railroad man gulped. "Fry is an officer of the law!"

"Somethin' is all snazzled up!" the sheriff groaned.

"Ask Joe whether or not I caught him startin' to fire that brush he had piled up in the cut!" Long Sam grunted.

"Alright, there's somethin' to what Littlejohn says!" Fry burst out. "But you, Ott Sheppard, and you, Pat Casey, listen to me! I'll have your hides on the fence if you make—"

"Not so fast!" Pat Casey cut in. "Do you admit that you piled brush in that Bull Creek cut, and that Sam Littlejohn caught you in the act of puttin' fire to it?"

"Confound you, I only wanted to stop the train!" Fry yowled. "I got a tip that Littlejohn was up in Buckhorn last night, and that he would ride that log train down this mornin'."

"Joe is also a pal of Wilson Brule's, Pat!" Long Sam droned.

"Oh, he is, is he?" the white-haired little Irishman almost screeched the words.

"Now wait, gents," Sheriff Ott Sheppard put in hastily.

"Wait, nothin'!" Long Sam grunted. "Jail Fry."

OTT SHEPPARD'S deep-set black eyes rolled uneasily and a flush crept over his craggy face. He shook his head, looking from Joe Fry to Pat Casey.

"Since when, Casey, did you start hirin' professional thieves and killers like this Littlejohn noose-dodger?" Joe Fry piped up. "And howcome you're standin' around suckin' your thumb, Sheppard, when you ought to be pumpin' slugs into this bounty-plastered Littlejohn hellion? If I have to get tough about his—"

"Alright, Fry!" Ott Sheppard cut in grimly. "You've been hangin' around town here for over a week now, shootin' off your mouth about me bein' too thick-headed to stop the trouble between Mr. Casey and that Wilson Brule buzzard. I've seen you hangin' around Ned Witcher's Planters' Palace, chinnin' with Witcher and them two gun-hung men of his, Bull Packard and Cal Zigler. Ned Witcher and his bunch are in Wilson Brule's hire, even if I can't prove they are. Come on, Fry, and try one of my cells for size!"

Joe Fry's face got white with rage. But he finally nodded to indicate that he would submit to being jailed, then turned and put his raging eyes on Long Sam.

"I'll remember this, you animated beanpole!" he said thickly.

"You'll be busy enough thinkin' of other matters before my lawyers are through with you, Fry!" Pat Casey snapped. "I've had two of my special agents workin' some time, now, to see how many men around here are hooked up with Wilson Brule. It happens, Mr. Fry, that my men have definitely established the fact that Ned Witcher and his men go into a secret huddle with Wilson Brule every time Brule comes up here from his headquarters at Sinking Ford."

"Yeah, and that Brule cuss is in town now," the big sheriff scowled. "Come on, Fry. Soon as I get you locked up, I'll take a pasear around to that Planters' Palace dive of Ned Witcher's. Maybe I can corner Witcher and Wilson Brule and bounce a few questions off the tricky sons!"

"Joe, who gave you the phony tip that I was in Buckhorn and aimin' to ride that trainload of logs down this mornin'?" Long Sam asked.

"I've got nothin' to say to you now, Littlejohn!" the deputy marshal rasped.

Fry stomped away, the big sheriff following him, scowling uneasily. The sheriff returned to his office very quickly, sleeving sweat off his face.

"For a rookie detective, Littlejohn, you don't mind fetchin' in a live tiger!" Pat Casey said tensely.

"And look what a picklement I'm in by talkin' Pat into hirin' you, Sam!" the sheriff groaned.

"Simmer down, both of you!" Long Sam snorted. "Here, take Fry's gun, Ott. Just keep your lips stiff around Fry, and don't let the little cuss scare you. I think he will be glad to forget this whole thing by the time we turn him loose."

"Turn him loose?" Pat Casey asked

sharply. "Littlejohn, you didn't walk Fry in here on trumped-up charges, just to keep him off your neck, did you?"

"Joe didn't aim to wreck that train," Long Sam said evenly. "There wasn't anything but small brush on the track, which wouldn't have stopped even a handcar, much less a train load of sawlogs."

"Then Fry told the truth about only aimin' to stop the train, hopin' to nab you?" the sheriff asked hopefully.

"Absolutely," Long Sam declared. "And he'd have been shot to ribbons by those guards if I hadn't got him out of there before the train came along."

"Glory, lad, that's the truth!" Pat Casey cried.

"Fry would have been killed, sure as thunder," the sheriff nodded.

"Hangin' around Ned Witcher's fancy Planters' Palace, Joe got in somebody's way," Long Sam droned. "They handed him that phony tip that I was in Buckhorn and would be on the log train this mornin'. Whoever gave Joe that tip must have given him the notion of stoppin' the train with a fire on the tracks, knowin' he would be shot to pieces by the armed guards."

"Sam, I'll bet you've got the right slant!" the sheriff said excitedly. "I'll hustle back there and try to make Fry see what kind of a shenanigan was pulled on him."

Pat Casey nodded his white head. "I'll help you talk sense into him, Ott. But you better wait out here, Sam."

WHEN the two men had gone, Long Sam slipped out to the now-deserted street. He saw faces peering cautiously from doorways and dusty windows. The gaunt outlaw's eyes traveled down and across the street to Ned Witcher's Planters' Palace, and suddenly a grim smile touched his lips.

Ned Witcher was standing there in front of his ornate honkytonk—a short, fat man with a cigar stuck in one corner of his thick-lipped mouth.

Leaning against the building front beside Witcher was Bull Packard, a burly, thick-necked man wearing two guns low on his massive thighs.

Cal Zigler was there too, standing in the Planters' Palace doorway. Because of the shadows, Long Sam almost overlooked the tall, big-shouldered gunman. But he saw him now, and could faintly discern the white blotches that were the ivory grips on Zigler's low-slung six-shooters.

"Somebody in this crowd that was banked around here run and told Witcher that I had fetched Fry in," Long Sam mused. "People quittin' the street, the way they have, may mean they think Ned Witcher and them two killers of his are set for war."

Witcher said something to Bull Packard, who then followed his short, fat boss into the doorway of the establishment. Long Sam sauntered across the dusty street. He turned east towards the front of the Planters' Palace. He swung to a halt before a jewelry store window, apparently attracted by the display within.

But from beneath the brim of his hat, Long Sam was again watching the Planters' Palace. He could see the shadowy outline of Ned Witcher's face over the cutaway doors and knew that Witcher was watching him.

Long Sam pushed his hat back, scratched his head and glanced toward the door to the jewelry store, as if having trouble in making up his mind. Then he gave his shoulders a shrug, stepped to the door and went in.

And to the open-mouthed amazement of the young clerk within, Long Sam was out the back door as fast, comparatively, as he had come in the front door slow. Dodging rubbish piles and discarded packing cases, Long Sam got to the Planters' Palace without sighting anyone. He tried the back door, it opened, and the gaunt outlaw let himself into a room that was cluttered with cases of bottled goods, beer barrels, discarded furniture.

"Ought to be another door up here somewhere," Long Sam grumbled, feeling his way cautiously along a rough plank wall.

A board squeaked so close to Long Sam he recoiled in mingling alarm and astonishment. He heard faint thudding sounds then, and realized he had groped in beneath the stairs that led from the barroom and dance hall up to the private gambling rooms on the second floor. Ned Witcher's office was also up on the second floor, and Long Sam had a hunch that the dive owner was heading for that retreat.

Long Sam struck a match, and a few

moments later found the door he sought. He turned the doorknob and looked out into a narrow runway that led behind the long mahogany bar.

A beetle-browed bartender was at the forward end of the bar, facing the street doors. A double-barreled scattergun was leaning against the inside of the bar near his knees. There was no one else in sight, and Long Sam ghosted in behind the bar. He slid a gun out of a holster and slanted the six-shooter up at the barman.

"Don't touch the scattergun!" Long Sam's voice was a rasping whisper.

The barkeep jumped violently, flung his head around as he saw Long Sam's twisted grin and leveled gun.

"Well, well," Long Sam droned. "Moss Burton, sure as sin! Last account I had of you, you were makin' a livin' by bush-whackin' men who happened to have bounties on their hides."

Moss Burton grunted. "But I don't pack a badge no more, so yuh've got nothin' to worry about."

"You never packed a badge," Long Sam grunted. "Where's Ned Witcher and his two shadows?"

"Listen, Sam, I've been on duty since midnight, and I don't know where they are," Moss Burton growled.

"You're still a liar by choice, and a back-shootin' murderer at heart!" Long Sam said coldly. "Ned Witcher, and likely enough Bull Packard and Cal Zigler, are upstairs! Witcher left you to blast me with that scattergun in case I started through the front door."

A buzzer whirred sharply, three long bursts.

"That's the boss, wantin' me to fetch drinks up to the office!" Moss Burton gulped. "If I don't show up with the stuff, him or one of the others will—"

He broke off, pale eyes rolling uneasily behind swollen lids.

"Witcher and his two pet killers ain't here, remember?" Long Sam taunted. "But don't argue any more, Moss. Slide past me and head for the stock room."

Moss Burton slogged forward. He stomped on past as if he meant to do as he had been told, but Long Sam was not taken unawares when one of Burton's big feet suddenly lashed backwards in a savage drive and he opened his mouth to roar a warning to the men upstairs.

Long Sam's six-shooter bounced off his bristly head. The one-time bounty collector flopped down on his face, breath gusting from his sagging lips, senseless.

Long Sam holstered his six-shooter, picked up the shotgun at the far end of the bar. The buzzer cut loose again, and suddenly Long Sam was hurrying out from behind the bar and across the room. He took the stairs three at a time and was making the last leap to the upstairs hallway when a bullet hit him across the ribs, spinning him half around.

"Littlejohn got in here somehow, Boss!" Cal Zigler was yowling.

ZIGLER'S gun was popping again, and as Long Sam lost his balance and fell he saw the big-shouldered killer crouching before an open doorway. A slug from Zigler's pistol ripped the hat off Long Sam's head, and a second burned the tip of his right shoulder.

Then the scattergun in the gaunt outlaw's hands let loose and Cal Zigler was crashing backwards into the doorway.

Long Sam plunged to his feet, teeth set against the pain of the wound in his right side. He heard wild yells coming from the open room, which he now recognized as Ned Witcher's office. A gun went off in there, and Long Sam hunched down low, hurtling the buckshot-riddled body of Cal Zigler.

But even as Long Sam sprang into the room, a bullet slammed against the shotgun in his hands, slapping the weapon out of his grip. He folded at the knees and hit the floor, whipped his six-shooters from holsters and began firing.

Bull Packard was charging behind a pair of spitting guns, cursing hoarsely. The big man quit cursing suddenly and his mouth sagged open, spilling a cascade of blood over his chin and shirt front as he sank slowly down to the floor.

Long Sam's slitted eyes swung, for a gun was still spitting at him from a far corner of the room. A bullet slapped across his left cheek. He saw Ned Witcher wedged in behind a huge iron safe, and to Witcher's right, squatting behind a thick bookcase, was Wilson Brule, owner of the Valley Limited railroad.

Wilson Brule's thin, sallow-skinned face was smeared with blood, and he was daub-

(Continued on page 101)

Buried Deep and Safe

By DUPREE POE

Billy cut loose with the .45

Billy Blake sets a trap to recover the gold that disappeared with his missing partner!

BILLY BLAKE returned from town late that afternoon and found the poke of gold missing from its place in the cupboard of the one-room cabin. Joe Ainse was gone, too. Anybody but an old fool like Billy might have ridden back to the gold-camp town and put the law on that missing partner.

Instead, Billy cooked supper and ate slowly beside a campfire built outside the cabin. He decided he might stand the loss of his share of the gold, if he could just get his hands on Joe Ainse's scrawny neck. Just once!

"It don't look like a man you've knowed for more'n ten years would turn plain crook like that," Billy mused. His wizened face etched in hard lines, and his blue eyes glinted cold in firelight. "It jest goes to show that a man can't trust nobody these days!" he declared bitterly.

He let his gaze wander down the gulch to campfires where other men ate and rested. Through the dusk, those fires reminded him of the flaming greed for gold that consumed men's souls. Maybe a man shouldn't condemn the human race just because his partner turned crooked, but a thing like that sure did rile a man. Why not just blame it on raw gold, the thing men could not touch and resist? Raw gold brought out the best or the worst in any man.

The thought started an idea churning

around in Billy's mind. Suddenly, he slapped his thigh, almost shouted with glee.

"Dad-blamed me, raw gold was a temptation Joe Ainse couldn't resist. He stole all we had, and he'll come back to git some more if he thinks I've struck it rich. Then I'll put my hands on his turkey neck and squeeze all the crookedness plumb out of him!"

The claim was registered in both their names. Joe Ainse was legally entitled to half of all the gold taken from the claim. Other men had started false stampedes for the purpose of selling salted mines or bringing a bunch of gold-hunters into a country to sell them the things they needed. Billy had no scruples against starting a rush that would bring Joe Ainse back, with a lot of excuses to clear himself of stealing the gold, for he believed Joe would come tromping back in a hurry to get his share of the claim.

HE WAS up early next morning, before Luke Means came sauntering up the creek to borrow a cupful of salt. Billy grinned in his beard when he went to the cupboard for salt. He opened it just a crack, pretending he didn't want the other man to look inside. Luke Means stood there, gaunt and curious, trying to peer into the cupboard, while Billy groped around inside with a hand for the salt sack. Billy wanted to appear mysteriously cautious.

"Go ahead and open her up and git it!" Luke said gruffly. "What you got in there you don't want nobody to see, anyhow?"

Before Billy could answer, the tall man reached for the cupboard door and yanked it open. There on the shelf where Billy had placed them lay seven leather pokes bulging with gravel from the creek. In all appearance, those sacks might have contained gold from the diggings. Luke Means' dark eyes bulged. He reached for one of the sacks, but the oldster shoved him rudely aside. Billy knew the weight of one of those pokes would tell the lanky man it didn't contain gold. He didn't aim to let Luke heft one of them.

"Stand back there!" he ordered. "That ain't none of your blamed business, them pokes ain't!" His eyes looked mean under bushy gray brows.

The lanky man dropped a hand to the butt of his gun and looked at Billy through hard-sheathed eyes. In that moment, the oldster felt a cold chill pour through him. He had once seen such a look in the eyes of a killer. It frightened him. Quickly, he grabbed the salt sack and slammed the cupboard door.

"Doggone, Billy, there's a fortune in them pokes!" Luke gasped. Slowly, he relaxed, and the chill went out of his dark eyes. He managed a grin and watched the oldster pour a cupful of salt from the sack.

"It's downright strange Joe didn't say somethin' about them seven sacks the other day when I was over visitin' him," he drawled, then. "He let me heft a big poke he had there in the cupboard and seemed mighty proud you boys had taken out that much gold. I'd of never thought the sly old scamp was coverin' up a bonanza strike you'd made. Don't blame him for not showin' me, though. It ain't safe to have so much gold around. Men have been killed for less."

Billy laughed uncomfortably, seeing the coldness return to Luke's eyes. "Why, I reckon a man's safe enough in keepin' a rich haul of gold in his cabin if nobody knows it but him and his partner," he said.

Luke nodded a little too eagerly for sincere agreement of the oldster's statement. "You right sure nobody knows about this strike but you'n Joe Ainse?" he asked.

Billy felt the intentness of that question, but he was doing his best to start a stampede, and he knew no better method than to start miners talking about a big strike somebody had made. He nodded his grizzly head.

"Jest me'n Joe know—and now you," he said. "Now, look here, Luke, you ain't goin' out of here and start tellin' folks we've made a strike, I hope. You might start somethin' a man couldn't stop in time to take care of his own rights. I've been prospectin' a bit up the slope and it looks promisin'," he said in a secretive manner. "You swear you'll keep your big mouth shut about what you've seen here this mornin'?"

Luke grinned. "You can depend on me, Billy."

When the lanky man left the cabin, Billy had a good chuckle. He emptied the

gravel from those pokes and flung it into the creek. It had served its purpose well. He didn't put much stock in Luke's promise. No miner on earth could keep his blamed mouth shut about a big gold strike. Right now, he would bet Luke was heading down the gulch spreading the news. Then pretty soon, there should be a big stampede from town and from the outlying districts to which the word would quickly spread.

He hoped news of the big strike reached Joe Ainse, wherever he was, before the thing petered out and folks discovered it was all a false rumor. If anybody came to Billy Blake and asked about gold, he would truthfully tell them he hadn't found much of the stuff on his poor claim. That would make them think he was lying, and the stampede would be bigger than ever.

He went to work that morning with a light heart, but noon came and not a single miner came stampeding up the gulch. That was mighty strange.

That afternoon, Billy went up the slope a ways from the creek and pretended to be taking samples from a few prospect holes he and Joe Ainse had dug and abandoned a long time ago. Just in case people were watching him from a distance, he wanted to appear mysterious, confusing them.

AFTER working an hour, he had a strange feeling that nobody was watching. It just didn't ring true that Luke Means would keep his big mouth shut about that gold strike. That wasn't the way a gold-mad man should act—unless he had some sinister motive. Billy began worrying about Luke Means.

Billy recalled the look he had seen in Luke's dark eyes. The thought caused him to shiver slightly. Then, suddenly, he knew that Luke had told nobody about the alleged strike. Luke didn't intend to tell anybody!

Billy stiffened. "Why, I'll bet that dad-blamed fool intends to sneak into my cabin and steal them seven pokes he seen in the cupboard!" he said.

He glanced frantically toward the cabin, straining his eyes to see through the brush. A gaunt, lean man was moving stealthily down there. On the verge of

[*Turn page*]

SELLS FIRST STORY AT 60

"Since I am crowding threescore, my objective in taking the N.I.A. course was not to become a professional writer. However, while still taking the course, I sent an article to St. Joseph Magazine. It was immediately accepted. Encouraged, I wrote others. Our Navy accepted them and asked for more. All thanks to N.I.A."— Albert N. Hinman, 1937 East Silver Street, Tucson, Arizona.

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bellowing out his rage at the fellow, Billy suddenly shut his mouth tight and hard and looked at an old prospect hole somebody had recently covered. The earth looked fresh enough, as though moved within the last few days. It was mighty strange that Joe Ainse would have fooled around doing such useless work. Joe was a lazy cuss, anyhow.

Billy chilled, suddenly remembering that Joe had shown Luke Means the only poke of gold they owned, according to what Luke himself had said.

"It's sure odd Luke didn't ask me where Joe was?" Billy said, feeling a strange claw of fear grip his heart. "Maybe he already knew where to find Joe—and that poke of dust, too. Maybe he jest come over to find out what I'd have to say about my partner bein' missing!"

With that thought in mind, Billy moved over to the old prospect hole and began digging with a shovel in the loose earth. Pretty soon, the shovel struck something that caused Billy to turn mighty sick at his stomach. He looked at that object and saw a boot with a man's foot in it.

"Joe Ainse ain't never comin' back!" Billy said, shuddering. "That's him buried right here in this hole—and Luke Means stole that gold and killed him, buryin' him so's I'd think my own pard had betrayed me!"

IN that moment, Billy's belief in mankind returned. Joe had lived and died the kind of partner a man could appreciate, honest to the core. That was a mighty consoling thought, but it didn't soothe the bitterness in Billy's heart, or still the fear that suddenly gripped him. For he heard a booted foot out there in the brush crush a dry twig that snapped sharply.

He ducked low in the old prospect hole, wishing he had his gun. He never carried one, unless he went on a trip, for he and Joe had never hunted trouble.

"Come out of that hole, dang your ornery hide, and show me where you hid them gold pokes!" Luke Means called from the brush. "Come on out—else I'll start puttin' bullets in your mangy hide, Billy Blake!"

Billy shuddered, realizing if he left the hole he would be completely at Luke's mercy, and there was no such thing in that killer's heart!

"You ain't got your gun with you. So, you'd best come out," said Luke.

"You killed my pard and stole that poke of gold!" Billy accused, stalling for time in which to think. "You'll hang for it, Luke!"

Luke laughed harshly as he came from the brush with a gun in his hand. He sauntered toward the hole in which Billy was concealed.

"Unless you tell me where you hid them other pokes, I'll kill you a lot harder way than I let Joe have it!" he threatened.

In desperation, Billy remembered Joe's gun was gone from the cabin. Maybe Luke had buckled it on the dead man to make his partner believe Joe had taken it and run away with the stolen gold. No gold thief would leave home without his gun. Maybe Luke had buried it with the dead man!

Billy began digging furiously, glad that the killer was not yet close enough to see what he was doing. He was almost sobbing when he dug down to the corpse and found a gun belt buckled around Joe's middle. He jerked that gun from holster and shook dirt from the barrel, just as Luke looked over the parapet at him in the hole. Billy stood up quickly, the gun in his hand.

Luke Means saw that gun and jerked his own weapon up quickly, thundering, but he was caught by surprise and his bullet missed its mark. Billy cut loose with the .45 that had belonged to his late partner and saw Luke's knees buckle. The killer fell on his face, dying.

Then, Billy stood there and looked down at the man he had killed. He bent over the body and searched it properly until he found the missing poke of gold. Raw gold, the kind that caused men to do mighty bad things sometimes!

Solemnly, Billy looked at the cold form of his murdered partner and said: "Joe, I'll dig you a proper grave and bury you deep and safe enough to keep you until the good Lord comes a-lookin' for honest men on Judgment Day."

And he somehow believed Joe got his message over there beyond the Great Divide.

●

Next Issue: THE BORDER OUTLAWS, a True Story of Captain McNelly of the Rangers!

(Continued from page 96)

ing at it with a handkerchief.

Long Sam felt a bullet skim across the top of his head and ducked so violently he bumped his nose on the soft rug. He jerked his head up and caught Ned Witcher hopping out from behind the safe, beginning to grin in triumph.

Long Sam fired two rapid shots, one from each gun. Ned Witcher's mouth flew open, and suddenly he was pitching down to the floor, blood spilling from two bullet holes fairly between his pale eyes.

"Alright, Brule!" Long Sam called hoarsely. "This is once you're caught in the open. Waltz out, and let's head for jail!"

"A buckshot cut my forehead wide open, Littlejohn," Wilson Brule said calmly. "But this is no fight of mine. I only dropped in for a visit with Witcher, and was caught in the fracas."

"You're also caught by the seat of your fancy pants, with a charge of hirin' arsonists to strike at Pat Casey's railroad!" Long Sam droned.

"You talk like an idiot!" Brule snorted. "Why should I want anyone to bother Pat Casey's two-bit road?"

"Because that hundred miles of railroad old Pat built is everything *but* a penny-ante, two-bit layout!" Long Sam snorted. "You held a franchise, but figured a hundred miles of rails connectin' your Valley Limited with the big line to the north would never pay off. You sold old Pat the franchise, and had everybody laughin' at him thinkin' he was a fool to lay steel out across those hills and valleys. But Pat laid the rails—coal minin', lumberin', stock raisin' and farmin' sprung up along his road—and now you want it back."

Wilson Brule walked out into the room, blue eyes coldly mocking as he mopped blood from a deep gash across his narrow forehead. Looking at him, seeing the man's complete confidence, Long Sam wondered bitterly if this shrewd devil would be able to wiggle free to go on plotting old Pat Casey's downfall.

"Funny thing is, Brule—I only came up here to have a talk with Ned Witcher," Long Sam droned. "I think Witcher sent

[*Turn page*]

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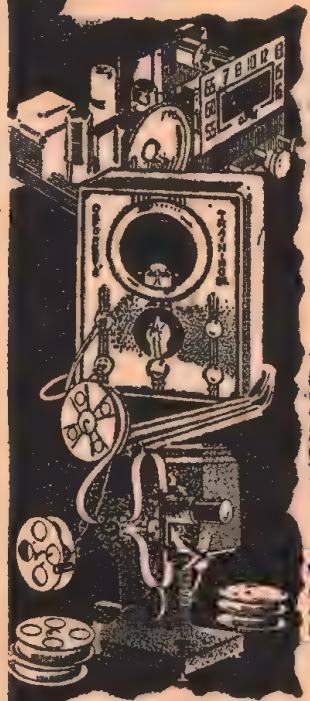

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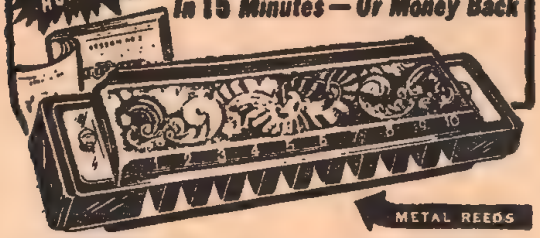

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Joe Fry out to pull a stunt that was supposed to be the death of Fry and a heap of trouble for Pat Casey. You dreamed up that stunt of havin' Joe Fry try to flag one of Casey's trains, knowin' the guards would kill Fry. I was hopin' Ned Witcher would admit that."

"Ask Ned," Wilson Brule laughed thinly, jerking his heads towards Witcher's dead hulk. "Or ask Bull Packard and Cal Zigler," and he pointed toward the two bodies.

"Sure, Ned Witcher and his two thugs are dead, Brule," Long Sam shrugged. "But I wouldn't crow too soon, if I was you."

LONG SAM heard boots coming up the steps and moved away from the door, smoky eyes watching Wilson Brule stiffen. Then Sheriff Ott Sheppard and Pat Casey were coming into the room, shoving Moss Burton ahead of them.

"Sam, you're lookin' like a stuck pig!" Pat Casey shrilled. "But you've shot the daylights out of Witcher and his two killers, that's certain. And look what you've got for Ott's jail, now!"

Pat Casey's eyes were on Wilson Brule, who smiled thinly and held the handkerchief to his cut forehead.

"Neat move, Pat, getting this Littlejohn gunhawk on your payroll," Brule chuckled. "But if you want the pants sued off you, let him jail me as the fool is threatenin' to do!"

"We found this one stumblin' around in the barroom, Sam, cussin' because he had lost his scattergun," Sheriff Ott Sheppard said, shoving Moss Burton forward. "Want him?"

"I'll say we want him!" Long Sam grinned. "Moss Burton is a professional killer. Posin' as a bartender was pretty smooth, but it won't keep his neck out of a noose. He's workin' for Wilson Brule, not Ned Witcher. Provin' that Moss led the gangs that have wrecked four of Pat Casey's trains won't be too much of a chore."

"You're batty!" Moss Burton glared at Long Sam. "I've worked the night shift here at the Planters' Palace for the past year!"

"Yeah, you worked the night shift here," Long Sam nodded. "But each time a train has been wrecked on Pat's line, it just

happened to be on yore night off! What Wilson Brule didn't tell you and Ned Witcher is that two of Pat Casey's best special agents have been checking and double-checking on the whole bunch of you here who were doing Brule's dirty work!"

"Boss, yuh knowed some of Casey's railroad snoops was watchin' me and the others and didn't warn us?" Moss Burton questioned Wilson Brule.

"So he admits he's workin' for Wilson Brule!" Long Sam said quickly. "He'll wish he hadn't been! Brule will toss him to the hangman in order to save his own neck."

"Not me, feller!" Moss Burton said. "Some of Pat Casey's railroad bulls have been checkin', or you wouldn't know that nothin' happened to Casey's trains only on the nights I was off duty. Maybe Brule didn't tip me off—"

Brule, a raging oath on his lips, flipped out a gun, pumped three slugs into Moss Burton's body before Long Sam could slap the raging man down with a gun barrel. Long Sam whacked him again, then wrenched the gun out of his fingers, slammed him down in a chair at the end of the shiny desk.

"He killed Moss Burton deader'n a cracked bedbug, Sam!" big Ott Sheppard wailed. "Why didn't you shoot him before he could do that? Now we ain't got a chance of pinnin' anything on Brule."

"Nothin' except cold-blooded murder, since Moss Burton was not only disarmed but in our custody!" Long Sam said gravely. "You see, Ott, I remembered somethin' about this Brule hellion. Seems that the hooded murderers he bossed when him and his kind rode after the Civil War as State Police here in Texas, all feared Brule for one thing—his uncontrollable temper. I figured if I made Moss Burton blunder, that temper of Brule's would let go. But I didn't aim for him to kill Burton."

Long Sam looked down at Wilson Brule, who was white and tense, shocked out of his fit of temper by the shadow of the noose.

"Let's go, Brule," Long Sam said calmly. "I only signed on with Pat Casey last night, and sure didn't figure on workin' myself out of a job this fast. But looks

[*Turn page*]

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like I have, for with you jailed on a murder charge I reckon Pat won't need me any longer."

"Take your prisoner on to jail, Ott!" Pat Casey snapped at the big sheriff. "And Littlejohn, you need a doctor up here before you do any walkin' around."

Ott Sheppard pulled out a pair of handcuffs, linked Brule's wrists and took the stiff-faced prisoner out of the office, shooting a puzzled glance at Pat Casey as he left.

"Now, about this business of you quittin' me, Littlejohn!" Pat Casey gritted. "There's just nothin' doin'! Only, we'll let Joe Fry think you turned in your badge and left, otherwise the little bulldog will be botherin' you plenty."

"I'll think it over, Pat," Long Sam grinned. "Did Fry tell you and Ott anything?"

"Fry is too mad to make any sense, but did admit that Ned Witcher told him you were up in Buckhorn yesterday, aimin' to ride that trainload of logs down this mornin'," Pat Casey grinned. "I told Fry I'd leave it up to you whether we brought charges against him for attemptin' to build a fire on the tracks!"

"Good!" Long Sam chuckled. "Fry knew better than to pull a fool stunt like that, so we'll let him stew in his own juices until I'm patched up, and ready to swim that Sleeper hoss of mine to the yonder shore of the Rio Grande."

"But you can't quit me, Sam!" Pat Casey howled.

"I'll think it over, Pat," Long Sam sighed. "If I decide to keep on wearin' one of your special agent badges, I'll let you know before I head for Mexico."

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

•

SLICK IRONS AT BIG BOWL CANYON

by JACKSON COLE

•

Featuring JIM HATFIELD

(Continued from page 10)

to the mammoth Beardslee trout, which grow to 20 pounds or better.

The Beardslee is found in Lake Crescent and nowhere else. It's generally caught by deep trolling, with wire line. Here is one of Nature's marvels, an orchid of the aquatic world.

In form, as well as size, the Beardslee trout closely resembles the steelhead. Scientists claim it originated from steelhead stock, centuries ago when Crescent Lake was accessible from the sea, not isolated by a high falls on the outflowing Lyre River, as now. Silver-bellied, the back above the medial line is the deep, iridescent blue of a butterfly's wing. The fins, all but the tail, are unspotted.

Being a great rarity, a Beardslee is a prized trophy. I was lucky enough to take three, one of them on fly from shore, along with some husky cutthroats.

Lake Crescent

Lake Crescent is one of the most beautiful lakes in the West. It is a striking opal blue, as clear as famous Lake Tahoe in California-Nevada, or Crater Lake, Oregon. It's about 10 miles long, with many bays and coves and curving, tall-timbered shores.

Though only around 500 feet above sea level, it's 625 feet deep, which means that the bottom is below the ocean's surface. Its magic color, reflecting the tall firs, is a scene never to be forgotten on a clear, calm day, with Storm King mountain poking its rocky crest through a wreath of clouds at the foot of the lake.

The LaPoel campgrounds, maintained by the Park Service, give free accommodations on the south shore—about 20 grand camp spaces with outdoor fireplaces and iron-topped stoves, plenty of wood and water and a Ranger in charge, also a big shelter containing a community kitchen. There are several cottage and hotel resorts, also. I stayed about a week at LaPoel, mainly because it was so comfortable and attractive, there beside a dashing creek, under a fir 10 feet through at the base.

I'd like to be able to tell you that the entire peninsula is one vast virgin forest.

[*Turn page*]

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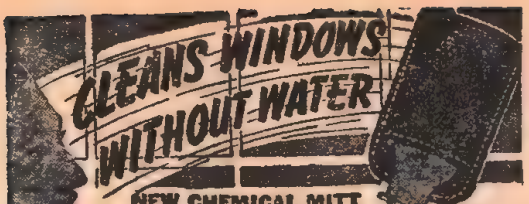

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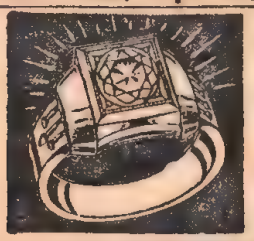

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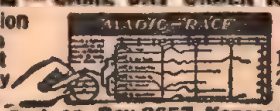

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The sad truth is, a great part of the centuries-old stand of fir, spruce, red cedar and western hemlock has been razed by loggers. It's hard to believe that civilization could have devoured such a tremendous amount of timber. But much of the country was logged-over years ago, so now the ugly stumps and scars are hidden by a flourishing second growth.

Enormous fortunes were made by the big logging companies off of public lands they leased at ridiculously small price. They are still powerful in politics, and scheming to raze the National Park area. Already they've contrived to grab fringe areas of park timber, and unless public interest is aroused, they'll probably win the fight to seize it all.

The log barons were attracted in early days to the peninsula, because timber could be removed with almost no hauling. They stripped the slopes and dumped the logs in the closeby sound, towing them in immense rafts to the mills. In nearly every cove, inlet and river mouth you see log booms containing millions of feet of lumber in the raw.

Besides logging and commercial fishing, the peninsula supports some minor, profitable occupations. I met a little old lady camped on the Duckabush who gathered huckleberry brush. She tied it in bundles and shipped it to florists, who use it to make wreaths and sprays. She hired pickers that made up to $125 a week and told me she had sent two boys through college on her huckleberry earnings.

Sword Fern

Other summer wild-croppers roam the Rain Forest, gathering sword fern, also in demand among florists. Gathering cascara bark and the leaves of foxglove, from which the drug digitalis is distilled, is another small, wilderness industry. Ranching and stock-raising is on a small scale.

Game is plentiful back in the jungle-like forest. Hunting season is in the fall. Elk and black bear are numerous. Deer are almost too common to notice. Deer being plentiful, there's a scourge of such predators as wildcats and cougars. A popular sport among the natives is cougar hunting. You see packs of cougar dogs in nearly every back-country dooryard.

There's a $50 state bounty on cougars.

One man told me he had taken 20 of the big cats during the winter. I reckon he didn't do much else. Chasing after a hound pack in that tangled undergrowth is too lively a pastime for me.

The region is famous for clams and oysters, especially along Hood Canal, which isn't a canal at all, but a long, scenic arm of Puget Sound. Clams of several kinds are easy to get at low tide. I could hardly believe my eyes when I uncovered six or eight at every shovel full of gravelly sand. Hardest to get is the delicious but deep-burrowing geoduk (called gooeyduck). You need a long handled shovel and a strong back, for geoduks.

Oysters R Numerous

Originally, peninsula waters contained a few small but delicious Olympic oysters. A larger, more prolific oyster was introduced from Japan. Now they're numerous and oyster farming is an important industry.

You see shell heaps as big as box cars. I

[*Turn page*]

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met up with an enterprising man named Canterbury who ran an airplane service, shipping out fresh-shucked oysters. Those flying oysters were served to diners-out in Seattle a half-hour after they were harvested in Quilcene Bay.

What struck me as odd, those oysters grow by the tons, right out on the tideflats, acres of them exposed when the tide is out. No need to dredge for them, like down along the Texas gulf. Folks go out with a sack and pick 'em up. The usual tourist charge, on privately-owned land, $1 a two-bushel sack.

Shrimps and crabs are harvested, too, with traps and nets, and Maine lobsters are being planted in the sound, with the prospect that they'll take hold and flourish like the Japanese oysters.

It's a land of plenty, all right. You can split enough shakes from some of those old spruce stumps to shingle a house. Game, fish and other seafood and wild berries help keep the locker filled. For those who can rough it, pioneer-style, the Olympic outlands are a haven in this crowded, troubled world. But before you settle there or elsewhere, roam it first like I did, with my tin Jenny mule!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

IN AMERICAN writing time is referred to as a river, a thing that flows continuously onward to a definite destination. In the writings of India time is a wheel and repeats the same circular course over and over forever. Somewhere between the occidental philosophy of continuous progress and the oriental belief in endless repetition lies the truth; for time is neither a wheel nor a river. History repeats itself, but never exactly, and generations of men tend to take from the past building blocks with which to make an ever firmer foundation for the good life.

One of the facts that make life sometimes seem like the wheel of the orientals is that progress begets power and power begets conservatism, which is opposed to progress. The enterprising youth, the man who when young tries to do new things in a new way, is likely to attain power and a life of ease and comfort. Then change becomes his enemy and the agents of change become to him everything bad from "boondogglers" to outright traitors.

Old Clate Bradshaw was like that. As a youngster he'd left the protected fireside of his parents and headed West for high adventure in the undeveloped land of Texas. He had the pioneer spirit; he was enterprising; he'd try anything once, and the fact that it had never been done that way before was a challenge rather than a difficulty to Clate's young strength.

Some said that Clate got his start in cattle with a breed that had twins or triplets every year, or that many of his early herds came into his possession with their backs wet with muddy water from the Rio Grande. However that may be, when Clate went West the wily Texas longhorns left untended during the Civil War had multiplied and scattered and gone unbranded to the point that it was largely a matter of first come first served.

And the man who rode the hardest, put in the longest hours, and tossed the longest loop, turned up with the best hand in the final shuffle!

But like so many other young rebels, Clate grew rich and powerful and old. Let's dip into the new Jackson Cole novel that you'll read in the next TEXAS RANGERS, a yarn named SLICK IRONS AT BIG BOWL CANYON, and see what kind of a person Clate Bradshaw had become when the railroads started pushing West:

The old cowman sat by a window of his big ranchhouse and gazed across his broad acres upon which grazed cows and prime beef steers by the thousands and tens of thousands. He gazed to the south, noted a progressing thread of smoke against the distant skyline, and growled. He glanced north, noted another misty streamer against the even more distant northern skyline, and growled.

Those curling dark feathers represented progress, and Clate had no use for progress, which he defined as change. He was satisfied with conditions as they had been and were. Owner of a great spread, and admitted leader of men and former of opinions in a wide section, he exercised almost feudal powers over his vast domain. No, Bradshaw didn't have any use for the thing called progress.

Bradshaw growled again as he gazed into the southwest. But his eyes quickened with interest as he spotted a horseman riding toward the ranchhouse. A few minutes later, Ron Sealy, his foreman, dismounted in the yard and came on into the house.

"Well," rumbled Bradshaw, "how goes it?"

Sealy shrugged his sinewy shoulders. "The boys are doin' the best they can, but cowhands ain't farmers, and never will be."

"Them dang railroads!" Bradshaw spat. "Takin'

[*Turn page*]

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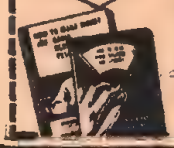

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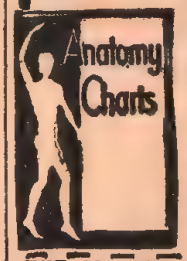

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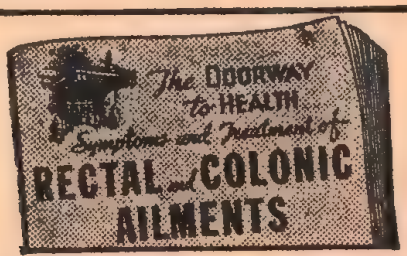

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over all the labor in the section with their high pay!"

"Uh-huh, they've done that, all right," Sealy agreed. "But yuh can't overblame the Mexicans. They're makin' more dinero than they ever knew was in the world."

"They're just natcherly no good," declared Bradshaw. "None of the boys have quit."

"You've always treated the cowhands like men, boss, and they appreciate it. They'd stick by yuh no matter what happened. The Mexicans, you don't like. So they work for the money yuh pay 'em and that's all."

Bradshaw glared fiercely at his foreman and swore, but he knew very well, no matter what attitude he adopted toward Sealy, he never scared him, and never fooled him. Abruptly, he changed the subject.

"How about that new hand yuh hired last week?" he added.

Sealy's keen black eyes brightened. "He's prime," he replied. "I never saw a better hand with horse or a rope, and he knows more about the cow business than either you or I do, and that's sayin' plenty. I wish I had a dozen like him."

"Sounds like considerable of a gent," Bradshaw agreed. "Big feller, ain't he?"

"Uh-huh, he sure is. About six-four, I figger, with shoulders wide as a barn door. He's a cowhand all right—but I got a notion he ain't worked at it over much for quite a spell."

"How's that?"

"Look at the jigger's hands. What rope callouses there are on 'em were made a mighty long time back, but he *has* got callouses on his thumbs and first fingers."

"Quick-draw man, eh? Chances are he'll drag his twine all of a sudden, a day or so before a sheriff or Ranger shows up—"

Bradshaw turned abruptly at the sound of approaching hoofbeats. His face darkened as a group of four riders swept past the ranchhouse. Foremost was a rather tall, well set up young man with a humorous mouth. There was a twinkle of amusement in his gray eyes as he glanced toward the stiff-backed pair at the window. Bradshaw spat a vicious oath as the quartette drummed around a bend out of sight.

"It sure makes me want to paw sod—that owlhootin' hellion ridin' across my land and right past my house!" he snorted. "Some day I'll put a stop to it."

"It's an open trail, boss," Sealy cautioned. "Besides, nobody has ever proved any owlhootin' on Wade Fulton."

"If he ain't one, he will be," Bradshaw declared with conviction. "This section is gettin' so it ain't fit to live in. Killin's, holdups, wide-loopin'! And them confounded railroads are to blame for it all!"

Bradshaw grunted something that was not pious. "By the way," he asked, "what was that big new hand's name? I forget."

"Hatfield," Sealy replied. "Jim Hatfield."

Take it from there, rannies. A cowman mad at the railroads for invading his empire, outlaws on the warpath, farm hands on strike and big Jim Hatfield, the green-eyed

Texas Rangers gone to work for an enemy of progress. Looks like hell is about to go on location. Look forward to SLICK IRONS AT BIG BOWL CANYON, next month's featured novel!

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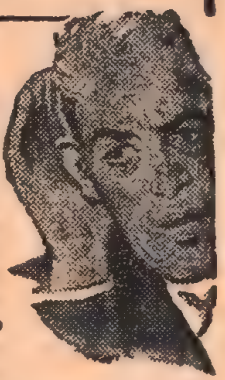

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Jim Hatfield, and you sure speak the truth. I just got through reading, THE TOMBSTONE TRAIL. Wow, what a yarn! All of the Jim Hatfield novels are different. But this one was more different.

Your readers ask for a lot of things from Jim Hatfield. They wanted a girl in his life. There was one. They wanted him to be near death several times. He was in THE TOMBSTONE TRAIL.

I have a friend who says his grand dad told him Jim Hatfield was a real man, a real Texas Ranger, and he knew him when he rode the range.

Please keep up your articles on famous Texas Rangers. They are very interesting.—*Donald Gurley, 9 Temple Ave., Newman, Georgia.*

Glad you get a real kick out of the Jim Hatfield yarns, Mr. Gurley. There is no limit to the adventures in the life of this salty Ranger. We're sure Jackson Cole will be able to keep them fresh, exciting, and even "more different."

The famous Texas Ranger articles will continue.

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for the past three years. Have always liked Jim Hatfield. I do not think it advisable for him to get married. However, I would not mind if he got involved with a girl for a little while—just to see what he would do.

I like Littlejohn, but I don't care for Doc Swap. He makes me tired. Am looking forward to your next issue, hoping it may contain something interesting.—*J. Mark Thomson, 36 Rue Charlevoux, Hull, Quebec, Canada.*

Doc Swap and Long Sam Littlejohn are controversial figures. Some like one; some

like the other. Long Sam is the man of fight and action, Doc Swap more of the planner and philosopher. Reckon there's a place for them both. We know some of our readers would raise the roof if we fired Doc Swap. Personally we like him as well as Long Sam.

Anyway, one thing our readers are all agreed on, Jim Hatfield is a top-hand in any reader's roundup on the range.

I have no desire to start a controversy over Jim Hatfield, but I say, let him get married, or at least engaged, but no Ranger partner please. The reasons are obvious. Hatfield is human, and with a woman to fight for, as well as the State of Texas, he would be a greater man—more human, less superhuman—and still more ruthless in pursuit of evildoers, for realizing the utter necessity of bringing law and order to Texas, he would fight all the harder, knowing that no real homelife could be his as long as the lawless hordes prowled the state.

Feminine interest really adds zest to a story, provided the man has a sensible, courageous girl for a wife. And Anita Robertson is the girl—in fact the only girl for a man like Hatfield.—*Fred S. MacMillan, 743 Windsor St., Montreal, Quebec.*

Plenty of arguments on both sides of this serious question; but as we have said before, Jim Hatfield is an hombre who pretty much runs his own life, and whether or not he takes on a wife is pretty much out of the control of either the readers, the writers or the editors of this readin' rancho. It seems to me that the best thing we can do is prepare ourselves philosophically to accept whatever decision he makes. He'll still be the same courageous Ranger, no matter what he does.

And he'll be around in next month's TEXAS RANGERS, when we'll all meet again. *Adios,* and thanks to everybody.

—THE EDITOR

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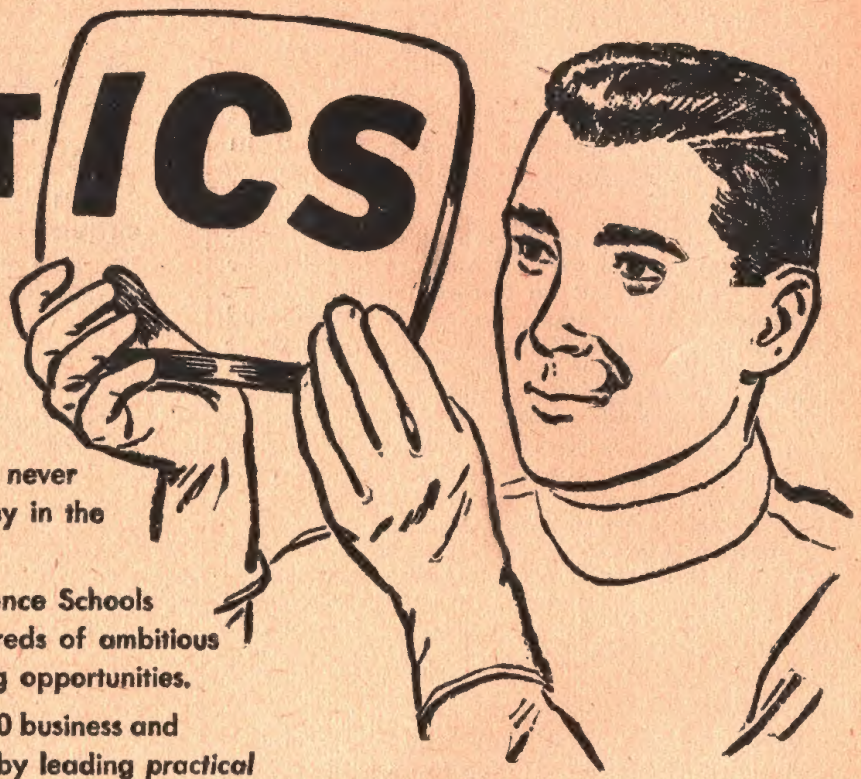

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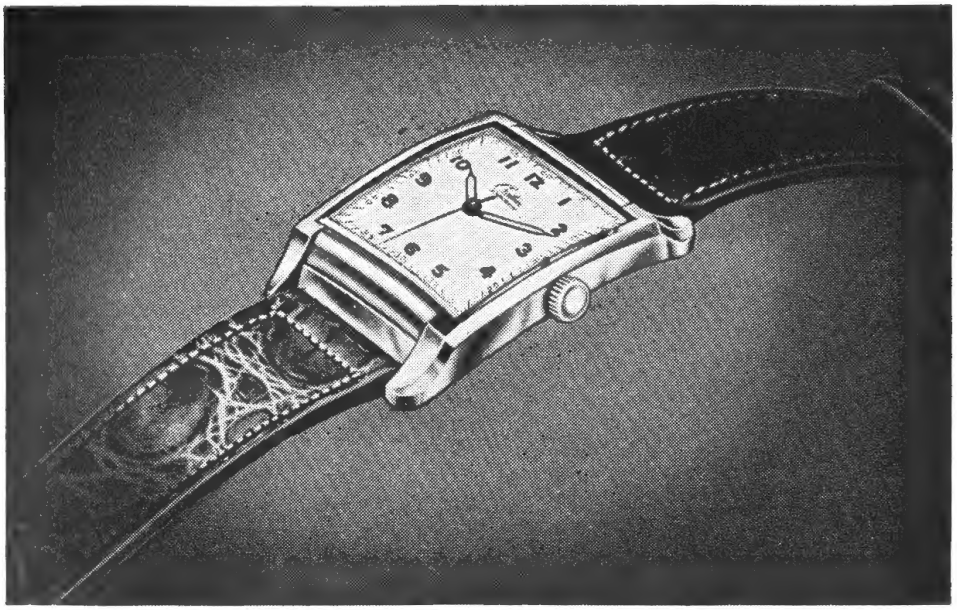

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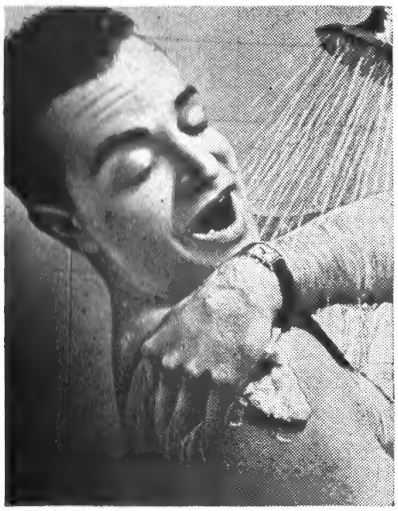

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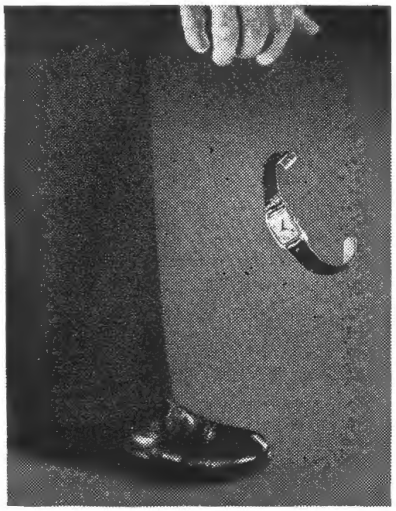

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